gameinformer®
THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

MORTAL KOMBAT 11

NETHERREALM LOOKS
BACKWARD TO MOVE FORWARD

NAME
Sergeant Phan

OCCUPATION
Ammunition Technician

GENRE
All

HANDLE
Shock_N_Awe0035

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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com
@GI_AndyMc

Fight!

Fighting games have had their ups and down over the decades, but they've always managed to hold their ground. I believe fighting games are the most intense competitive genre out there. It's the chess of video games, where strategy meets skill at 100 miles per hour. No sniper shot from across the map. No shotgun squatters. No shrinking battlefields. Just pure competition, round after round.

This issue celebrates fighting games old and new. First up is an in-depth look at the upcoming Mortal Kombat 11 (still powered by the legend, Ed Boon, who has been there since the start). The latest release once again revitalizes a series that gamers have returned to for years. The fatalities set a new standard, and the game's iconic, over-the-top violence continues unabated; like the early releases in the franchise, its unapologetic battles push boundaries, and act as a poster child for our first amendment right to explore all types of interactive experiences.

Next up we take a look back and examine our Top 30 Fighting Games of All Time, and take a look forward with some of the most intriguing fighters on the horizon, including an exclusive look at the next Samurai Shodown. Samurai Shodown 2 is one of my personal favorite fighting games ever, so I'm excited that we can pull back the curtain a bit on the latest iteration. While not as well-known as Mortal Kombat or Street Fighter, it has always had a style that speaks to me, and I'm glad to see the series getting a new release.

Fighting games are an important pillar to video games, and hopefully this issue inspires you to get out and play (though, I'm guessing a lot of you already have Super Smash Bros. Ultimate on your Switch). Hopefully, you can become the next great champion and I can cheer you on at the next Evo Championship Series; just remember to give a shout out to G.I. in your victory speech!

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

32 **Mortal Kombat 11**
Mortal Kombat 11 could be NetherRealm's most ambitious fighting game yet. We traveled to Chicago to dive deep on its battles, customization, story, and reveal a brand-new character. ***by Suriel Vazquez***

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter

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We flew to London to visit the set of the *Detective Pikachu* movie and chat with its cast, producers, and director about why it has taken so long to make a live-action adaptation of Pokémon.

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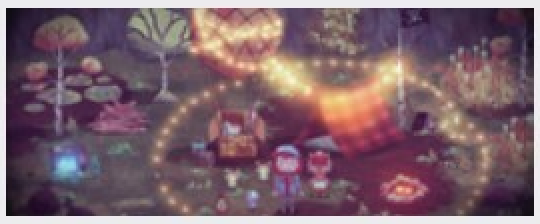
Google announced its game-streaming platform at GDC, and it has some big potential implications for the future of gaming.



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We visited the 2019 Game Developers Conference and came away with impressions for some indie games we're excited about.

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Premium, nerd-culture socks are all the rage right now. Here are some ways to decorate your feet.

46 The Greatest Fighting Games Of All Time
Much like the games themselves, the fighting genre has a complicated history with popularity highs and lows. We decided to look at all of its games and figure out which ones are our enduring favorites.

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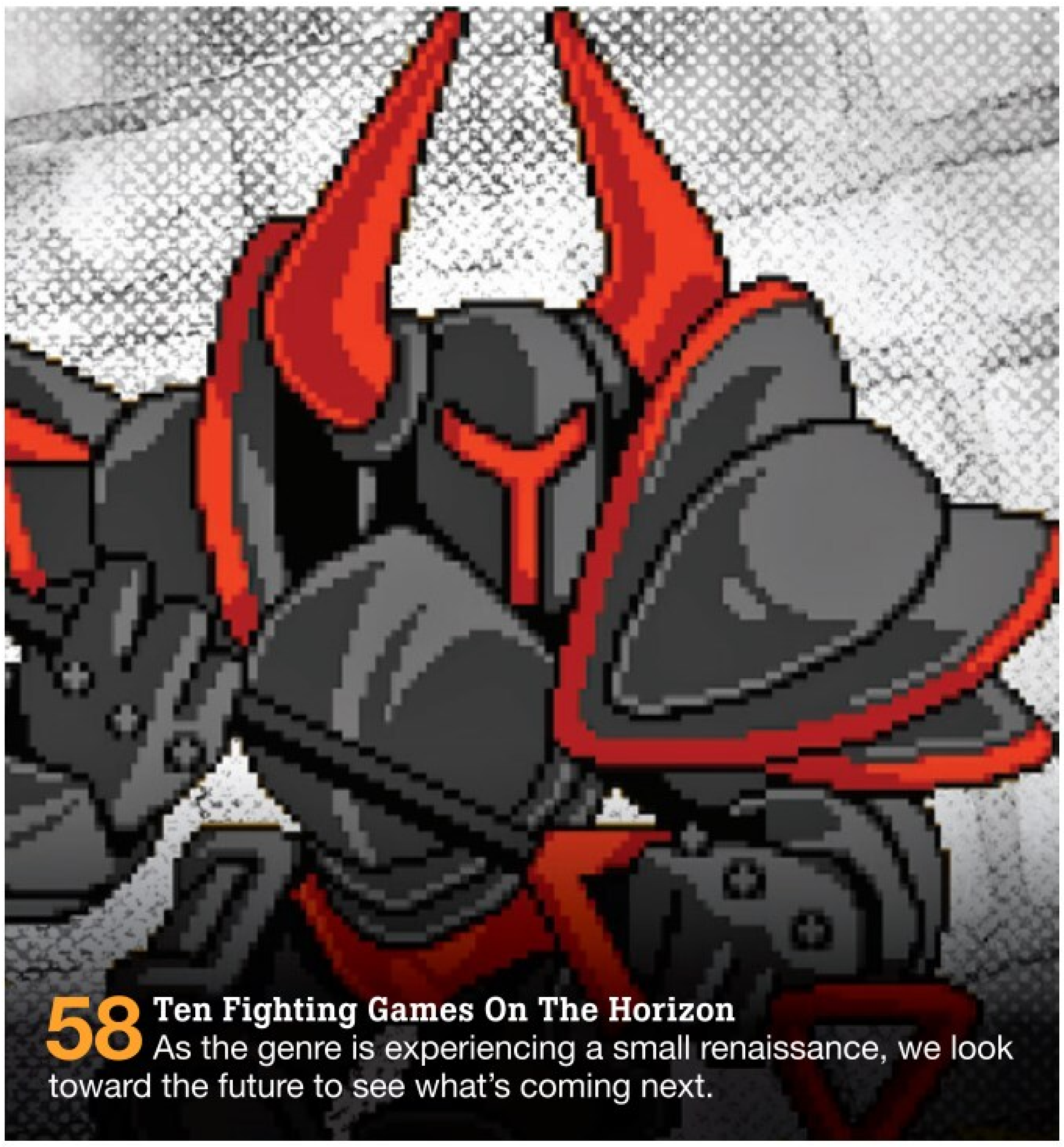


58 Ten Fighting Games On The Horizon
As the genre is experiencing a small renaissance, we look toward the future to see what's coming next.

64 Samurai Shodown
The classic SNK fighting franchise is coming back in a big way, and we went hands-on and played against its creators.

70 Pokémon Sword And Shield

We finally know a fair bit of information about Pokémon's upcoming Switch RPG.

72 Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2

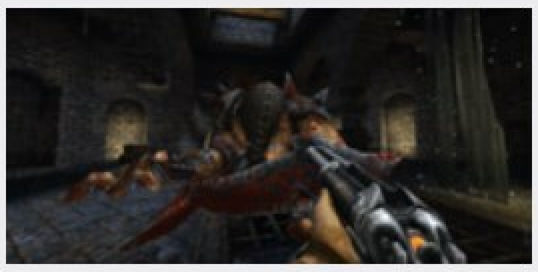
The gothic cult classic is making a return with a new entry.

75 Harry Potter: Wizard's Unite

The studio behind Pokémon Go is adapting a new license to its augmented-reality formula.

80 A Plague Tale: Innocence

Journey to a point in France's history that, frankly, you probably wouldn't want to visit in person.



82 Wrath: Aeon Of Ruin

3D Realms, which helped popularize the old-school FPS, is helping to bring this pixelated shooter to life.

86 The Division 2

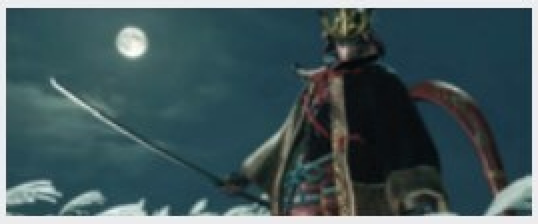
Ubisoft's sequel has a clear runway to be the RPG shooter of 2019. Does it stick the landing?

87 Devil May Cry 5

We liked the last Devil May Cry game, but there's just something special about returning to the original universe.

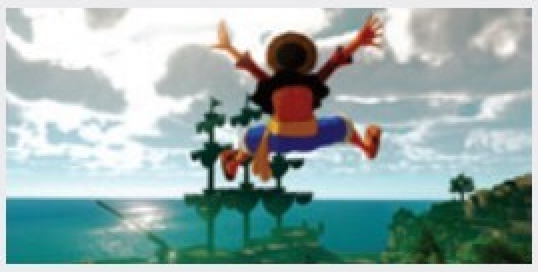
88 Anthem

Anthem has great shooting and flight, but much of the rest of the game falls short.



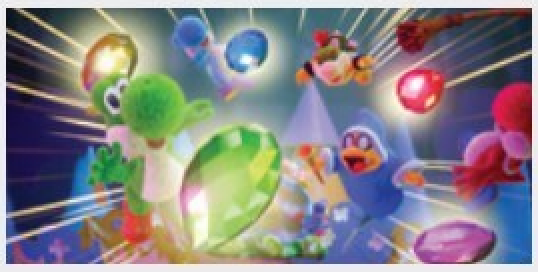
89 Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

Rather than return to the Dark Souls or Bloodborne universes, From Software has crafted a whole new punishing world.



90 One Piece: World Seeker

Anime games are pretty consistently disappointing, but World Seeker has a fun open world with great traversal.



91 Yoshi's Crafted World

Yoshi has moved on from yarn, and is now happily exploring a world of arts and crafts.

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Wrangler®

TO FIND NEW STYLES AND GREAT FITS, VISIT WRANGLER.COM

Readers got psyched for Obsidian's next RPG this month, said good-bye to a favorite Nintendo figure, and criticized criticism itself! Just another mind-bending month in The Feedback Zone.

Out Of This World

Your cover story on The Outer Worlds was great! After reading it, I can confidently say I'm now sold on it. I'm a 27-year-old gamer who grew up on RPGs. This game sounds like everything I've been waiting for since Fallout 4 dropped. And whereas Fallout 76 made me nauseous with disappointment, your feature on The Outer Worlds renews my hopes (and hype!) for the single-player RPG genre.

Catherine Ritchie
Elkins, WV

A number of readers wrote in to express their excitement for The Outer Worlds this month, drawing the same comparison to the Fallout franchise. While that may not be a surprise, it's worth noting Obsidian is a little wary of too much hype; The Outer Worlds is not meant to be a Fallout replacement, or a 100-hour open-world RPG. Find out more about the game by visiting gameinformer.com/theouterworlds.

Riiiiiiight…

After seeing your Her Stories: Inspiring Women In The Games Industry article (issue 311), I'm glad my subscription to your crap magazine is ending soon. Deciding to push the accomplishments of women in the industry just because they're women is disgusting and smacks of virtue signaling. What's next, pushing black people who make games? How about gay people? Why can't we focus on the abilities of people without bringing up gender, race, or anything else beyond a person's control?

Paul Stuko
via email

The reason the Strong Museum chose to highlight pioneering women in the games industry – and why we in turn chose to highlight their exhibit – is because their contributions have been routinely overlooked, and in some cases, completely forgotten over time. Setting the record straight about the vital role women have played in the history of video games isn't "virtue signaling" – and neither is wanting to inspire more women to play, create, and collaborate on video games.

Don't Hate The Game, Either

From the very start, Anthem had 20 gigabytes of patches, and I've experienced many gameplay crashes that resulted in the loss of XP and items. Now the new patch causes PS4 system crashes when closing the game. I know you want to give them a chance, but I believe they already had their chance. A top termination is the least I will accept, and I won't buy their junk again.

Mike Baker
via email

I was very excited about Anthem because it looked like an Iron Man simulator set to the backdrop of Jurassic World, and because BioWare is one of the few developers I trust to take pride in their games (excluding ME: Andromeda, of course). Now that I'm playing it, I'm not disappointed; Anthem is beautiful, the mechanics are fluid, and flying is a blast. That's why I'm surprised by all the hate it's getting online. The biggest complaints are the load screens, lackluster story, and general empty feeling of the world. Those are all genuine grievances, but I thought gamers had more fortitude than that. To me, Anthem is what Destiny should have been, and there seems to be a consensus that with more patches and a bit of TLC from BioWare, Anthem can be a great game. I can't help but feel we are being unreasonably hard on triple-A developers we used to love. Maybe we should be more supportive of companies trying to make great games without going bankrupt, instead of hating, berating, nitpicking, and then wondering where they've gone five years down the road (R.I.P. THQ, by the way).

Darwin A. Pringle
via email

Even with its rocky launch in the rearview mirror, there's still plenty of constructive criticism to be lodged at Anthem (which you can read in our review on page 88). The keyword, however, is "constructive" – we don't critique games just to tear them down, and we've certainly never rooted for a game to fail. The same can't always be said for discourse on the internet. If you find yourself demanding people lose their job for a game you don't like, you know you've crossed a line.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Too Easy?

I just finished Kingdom Hearts 3 and loved it. I have hand-eye coordination issues, a severe anxiety disorder, and I work a 40-hour job. Because of these things, I'm pretty bound to easy/beginner modes in games and was very grateful for Kingdom Hearts 3's low barrier to entry. When I go online, however, all I see is people complaining endlessly about the "lack of challenge" in KH 3, which feels like a blow to players like me who need that accessibility. Am I the only one who finds this obsession with Dark Souls-level difficulty a bit toxic?

Jennifer Miller
via email

Some players have always used difficulty to define their self-worth as gamers, and Dark Souls' "git gud" crowd is just the latest incarnation. Unfortunately, there is a double standard at play here; those insisting Kingdom Hearts 3 should include a harder difficulty mode for interested players are probably less supportive of an easier difficulty mode being added to From Software's games for the same reason. In any event, don't let the haters get you down. There's nothing wrong with playing games at a difficulty level that accommodates your interest and abilities.

Game On

Words can't describe my reaction to the news of Reggie Fils-Aimé retiring from Nintendo. I've been a Nintendo fan for more than a decade, partly because of his larger-than-life persona. His catchphrases, his sense of humor, and his appearance in some truly hilarious skits ("Regginator" being one of my favorites) have made him one of the most relatable executives in the industry. Seeing him leave is like the end of an era. That being said, I wish Doug Bowser the best of luck, and I hope Reggie continues his life with a body that is most ready.

Franklin Reed
Fishers, IN

While most of Nintendo's business decisions have always been made in Japan, there's no doubt Reggie was a great representative for the company, as evidenced by all the fans he made over the years. We wish Reggie the best of luck in his next endeavor and – wait a minute, Nintendo's new president is named Bowser?!

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"How hard would it be to turn COD's Blackout map into one big Zombie map?"

Probably pretty hard.

"I love RDR 2, but it was on almost every editor's top 10 list. Why?"

...Because we also love it?

"I'm wondering who illustrated your magnificent cover for The Outer Worlds?"

The equally magnificent Hannah Kennedy. See more of her art at hannahkennedy.com!

Most Conflicted Letter:

"I enjoy most of your articles, but it almost seems like your being paid to put most of the bs in your mag! I Know u can do better."

Question Of The Month:

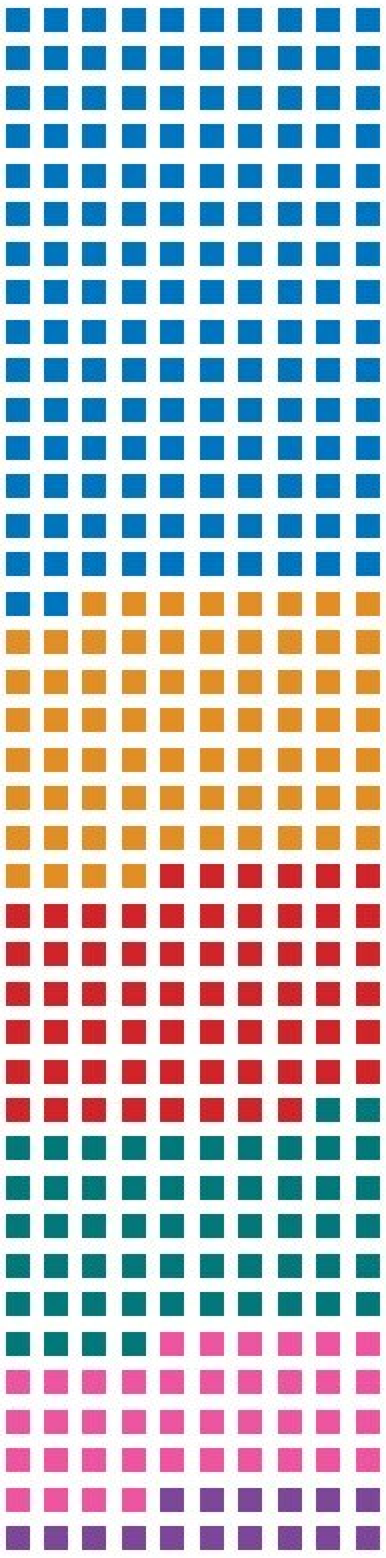
What's your favorite fighting game and why?

gi spy

(Left) We regret to inform you that we may have ruined Mortal Kombat 11 during our trip to NetherRealm Studios this month. Apologies!

(Right) Sony San Diego Studio's Nick Livingston and Ramone Russell dropped by the G.I. office to give us an early look at MLB The Show 19.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY



🟦 Anticipated For 2019

🟧 The Outer Worlds Excitement

🟥 Happy Kingdom Hearts 3 Fans

🟩 More Fallout 76 Not-Fans

■ Next-Gen Console Rumors

🟪 RE 2 Remake "Defenders"

Off To The Races

In issue 311, we asked readers what game they're looking forward to the most this year. The results covered a little bit of everything.

I'm most excited for Star Wars: Jedi Fallen Order. I know, I'm a glutton for punishment considering how EA handled Battlefront 2 and its canceled open-world SW game. But, you know what? I miss having a larger selection of Star Wars games! I loved The Force Unleashed, and I want to feel like a force-wielding badass again. I want to be a Jedi, man! EA has one last chance; if they screw this one up, I'm done.

Elliot King

I absolutely cannot wait for Luigi's Mansion 3. Luigi is such an underratedly awesome character, and I love seeing him in games where he shines. I also think the gameplay looks awesome, and hope it lives up to the other two!

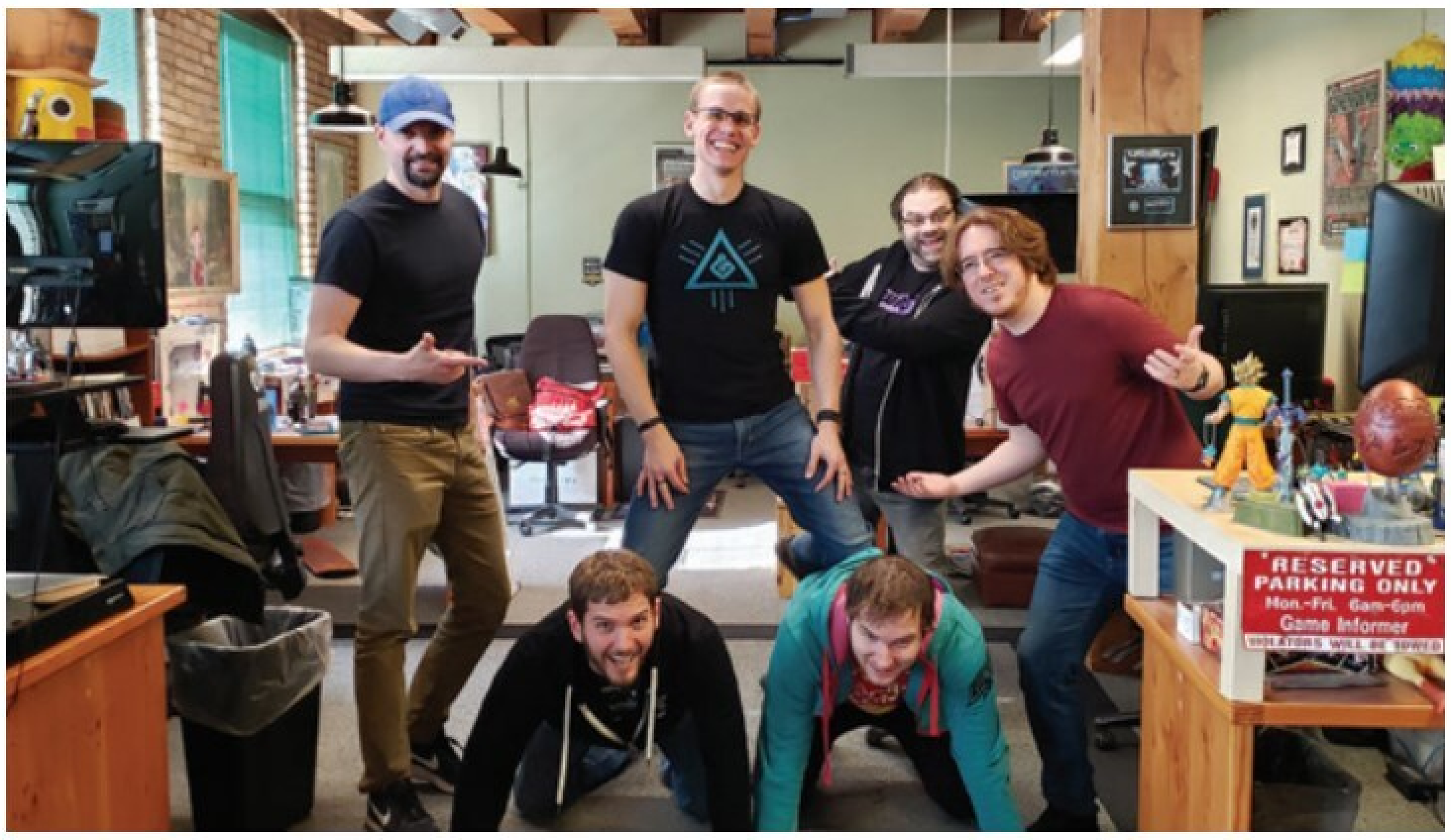
Gable Coe

The Division 2 is by far the game I'm most excited about. I've become a big fan of the battle royale trend with Call of Duty Blackout, Apex Legends, and PUBG. If Massive Entertainment creates a battle royale mode for The Division 2, it will probably be the only game I play until the next console wars.

Isaiah Drungo

I'm looking forward to Rune Factory 5 and Animal Crossing! I have to wait all year, but I know they'll be worth it because it's been years since a new entry for either series came out and I've loved both since the very beginning!

Brittany Toth



DEAD OR ALIVE
I'm a Fighter

(Left) Longtime G.I. and Extra Life supporter Zach Pligge stopped by the office to film a special Tactics Ogre Replay, and build a human pyramid! **(Right)** Dead or Alive 6 director Yohei Shimbori loves the series so much he even cosplays as the characters. We're glad he went with Bayman and not Tina.

WINNER

1 Nick Almeida

Let's see, Mario, Mega Man, and Dragonball in a physical painting…yep, all checks out!

2 Annie Wright

We're pretty sure you're not supposed to lie on sleeping horses like that, but Link gets away with everything.

3 Taryn Platt

Uncharted is pretty much an Indiana Jones rip-off, so a classic mash-up movie poster makes sense.

4 Taya Leonti

We like this adorable drawing more than Undertale's actual graphics!

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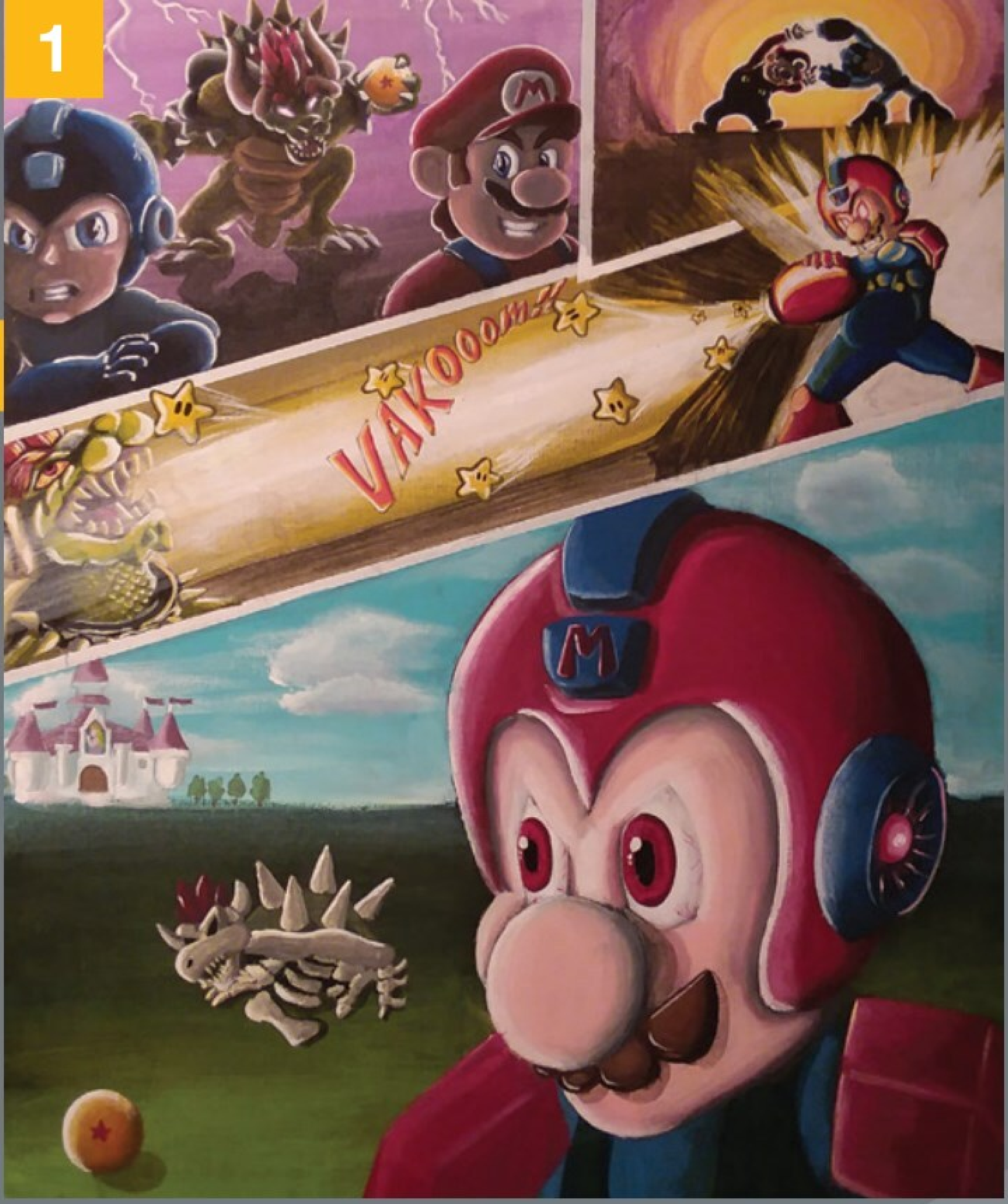

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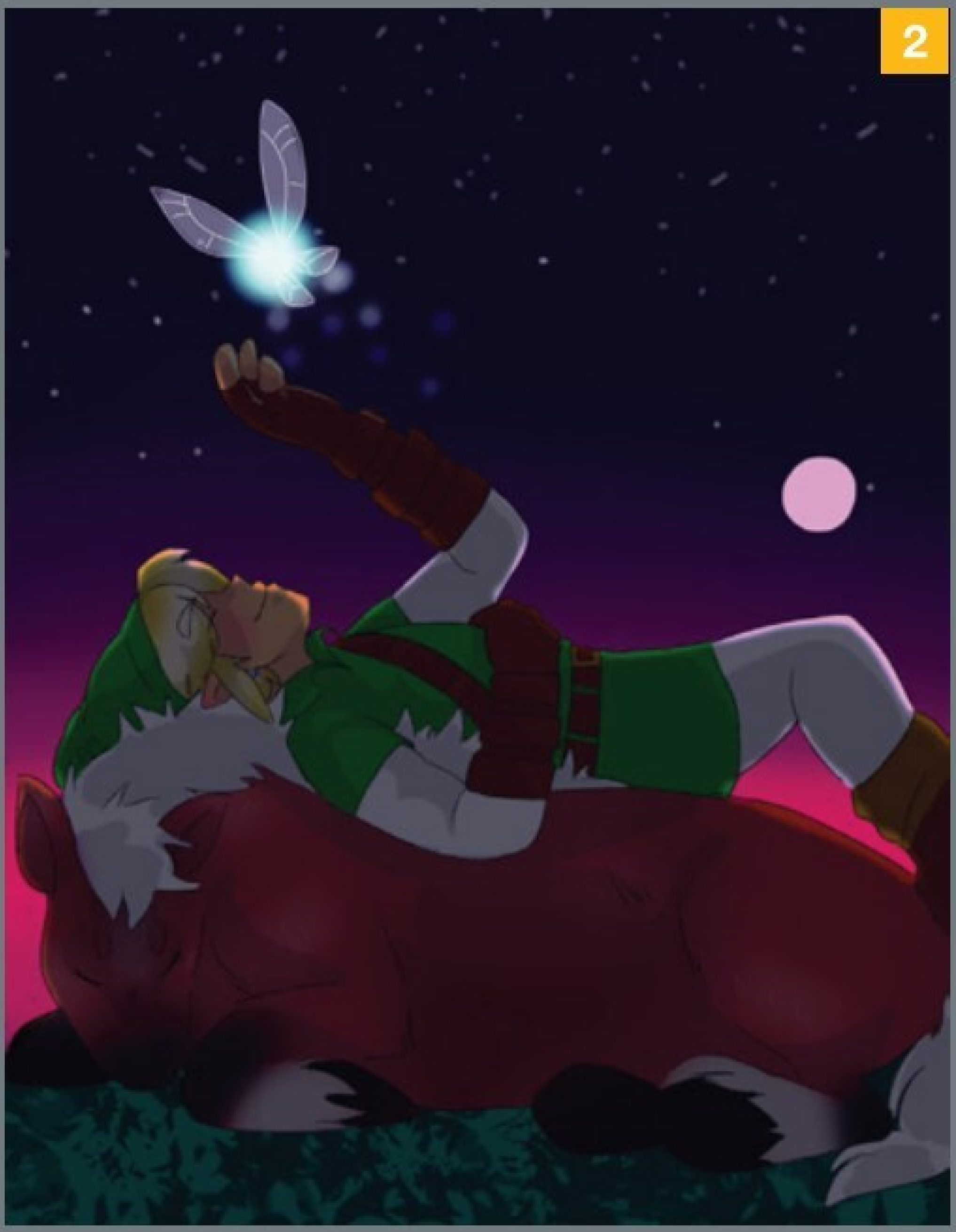

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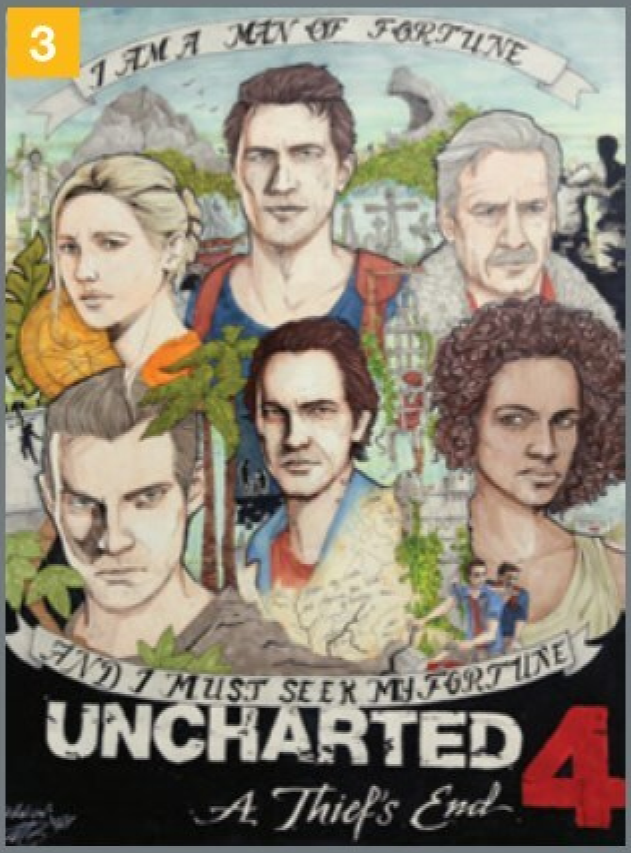
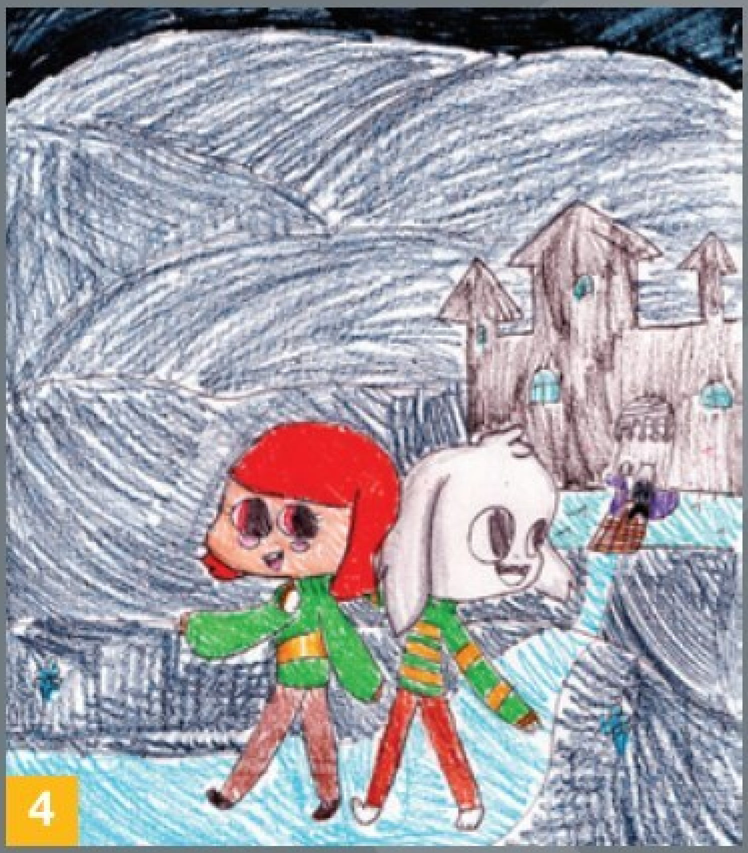

I AM A MAN OF FORTUNE
AND I MUST SEEK MY FORTUNE
UNCHARTED 4
A Thief's End

4



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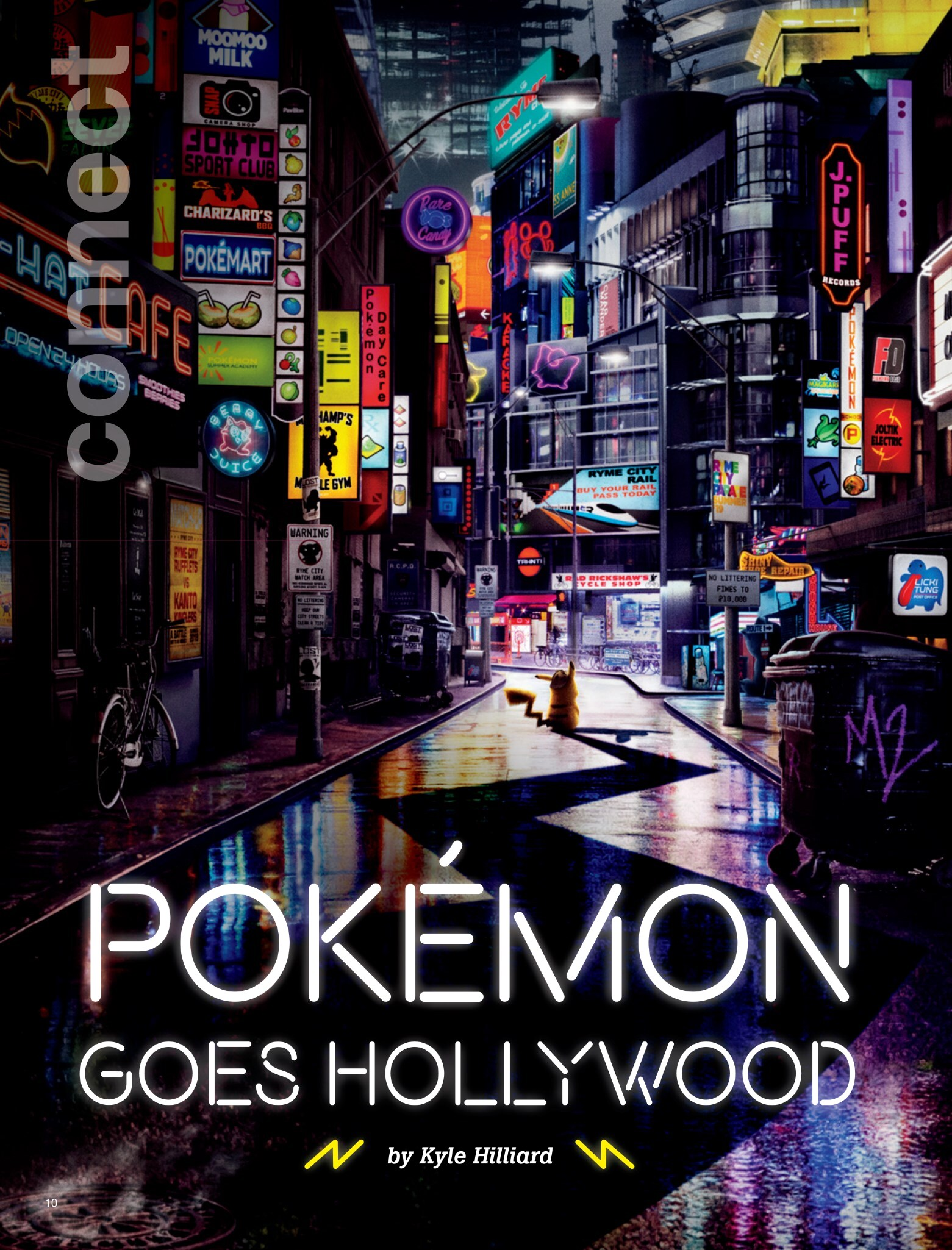
(Left) Earth Defense Force: Iron Rain producer Nobuyuki Okajima dropped in for an interview on The G.I. Show, so we made him eat bugs. That's professional, right? **(Right)** After telling us all about Drifters, Blind Squirrel creative director Haydn Dalton KILLED Reeves! It was pretty cool.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LICKI TUNG POST OFFICE

POKÉMON GOES HOLLYWOOD

by Kyle Hilliard

STYLE
PIZZA

Visiting the set of the Detective Pikachu movie

When Pokémon originally debuted in the United States, it was a massive hit. The best-selling games, popular anime series, and merchandise based on the original 151 Pokémon were everywhere. In 1998, an animated film based on the impossible-to-avoid franchise came to theaters with *Pokémon: The First Movie – Mewtwo Strikes Back.* The movie was critically panned, but it was a commercial hit, taking in an estimated $85 million in the United States alone. Since then, the Pokémon brand has only grown with myriad animated film follow-ups, video game sequels, and the anime that's still going strong today. People eat, sleep, and breathe Pokémon, which makes the *Pokémon Detective Pikachu* movie both an obvious foregone conclusion, and a strangely overdue adaptation.

In April of 2018, before any trailers or leaked art assets from the *Pokémon Detective Pikachu* set made their way to the internet, we flew to London to visit the film on a normal day of shooting. The movie had been announced and the cast had been revealed, including Ryan Reynolds' role as the titular Detective Pikachu, but nothing else was known about the film. Walking toward the set I passed signs on assorted vehicles and doors with the word 'Gumshoe' written in the familiar Pokémon font. Gumshoe was the production codename for the film, but the font betrayed any secrecy the name was trying to instill. The day I visited the set, they were on day 61 of *Detective Pikachu's* planned 75-day shoot.

HI-HAT CAFE
DISCO
TAXI

The Design

My first stop was a large room with walls covered in concept art, final renders, and environmental art for the film. A table in the middle of the room featured a cardboard model of what appeared to be some sort of laboratory. This was my first look at what *Pokémon Detective Pikachu* would look like and it surprised me. The environment art showcased a dense city with neon signs everywhere, many of them referencing specific Pokémon. "There is definitely that noir feel," supervising art director Ben Collins says. "You've really got those long shadows and beautiful light." Collins also described how many of the shoots had been at night and how often the sets needed to be "wet down" to give them that rainy, detective movie feel. Other environmental art showed a bright green countryside with a laboratory seemingly in the middle of nowhere. I later learned those scenes had already been shot in Scotland.

The Pokémon themselves resembled the game series' sprites, but they had realistic fur, feathers, and scales. Along with the art plastered on the walls, there were also giant cardboard standees featuring familiar Pokémon. I saw early images of Pokémon that would later be prominent in the trailers like Psyduck, Mr. Mime, and Pikachu, but I also saw Aipoms, Loudreds, and a Ludicolo. The film's visual effects producer, Greg Baxter, says the film will feature at least 60 different Pokémon and every human you see in the film will have a Pokémon with them, even for wide crowd shots. "I don't know which one is my favorite, but I know which one has caused me the most grief," Collins says, citing Ludicolo.

Ludicolo works at a bar, but it's a wide Pokémon that isn't too tall, which was difficult to design around. "You can't just design for humans," Collins says when describing how he and his team developed the layout of the film's

Bulbasaur undeniably looks like Bulbasaur, but with realistic amphibian-like skin

ENTRA
AXI
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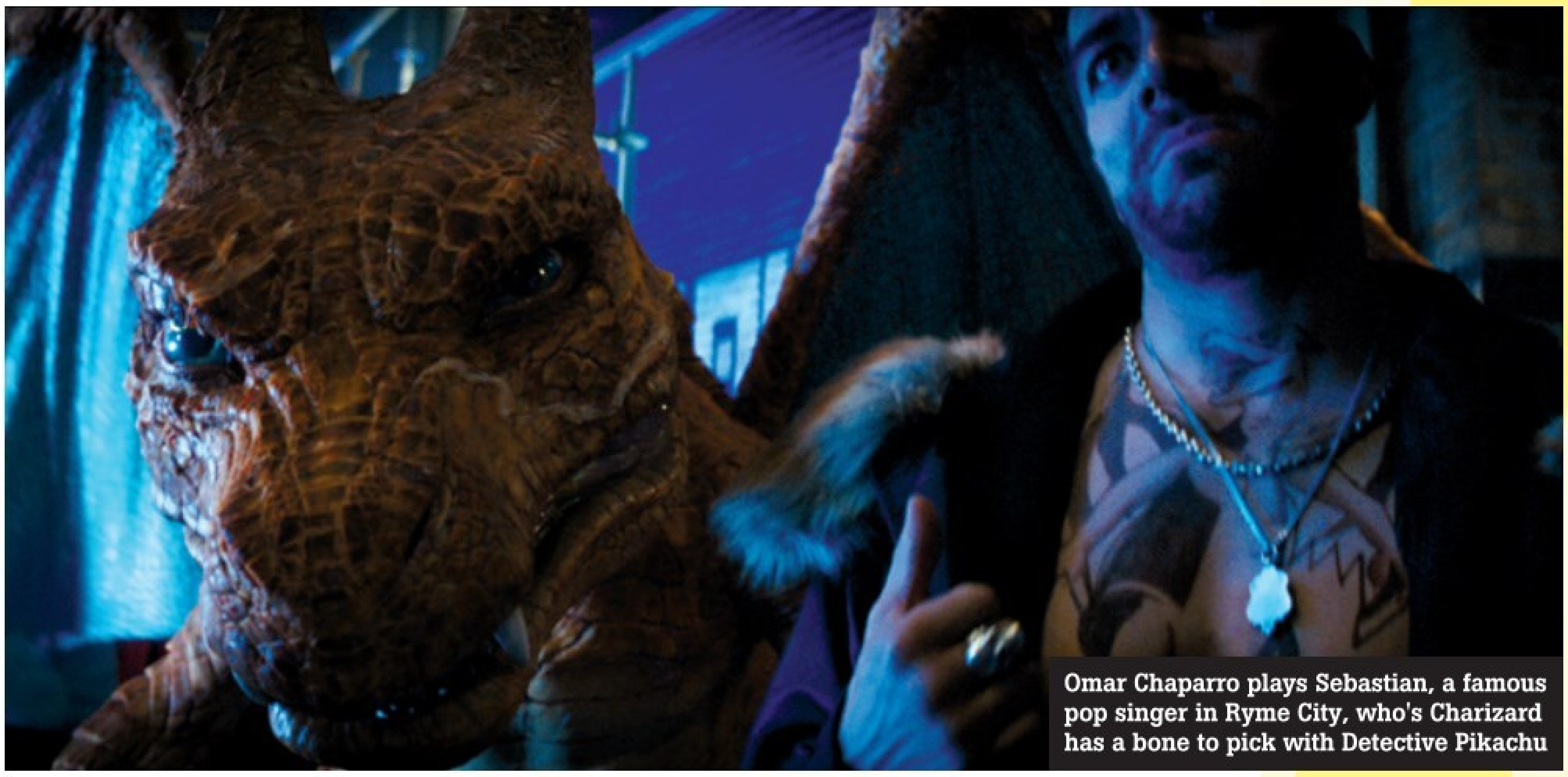
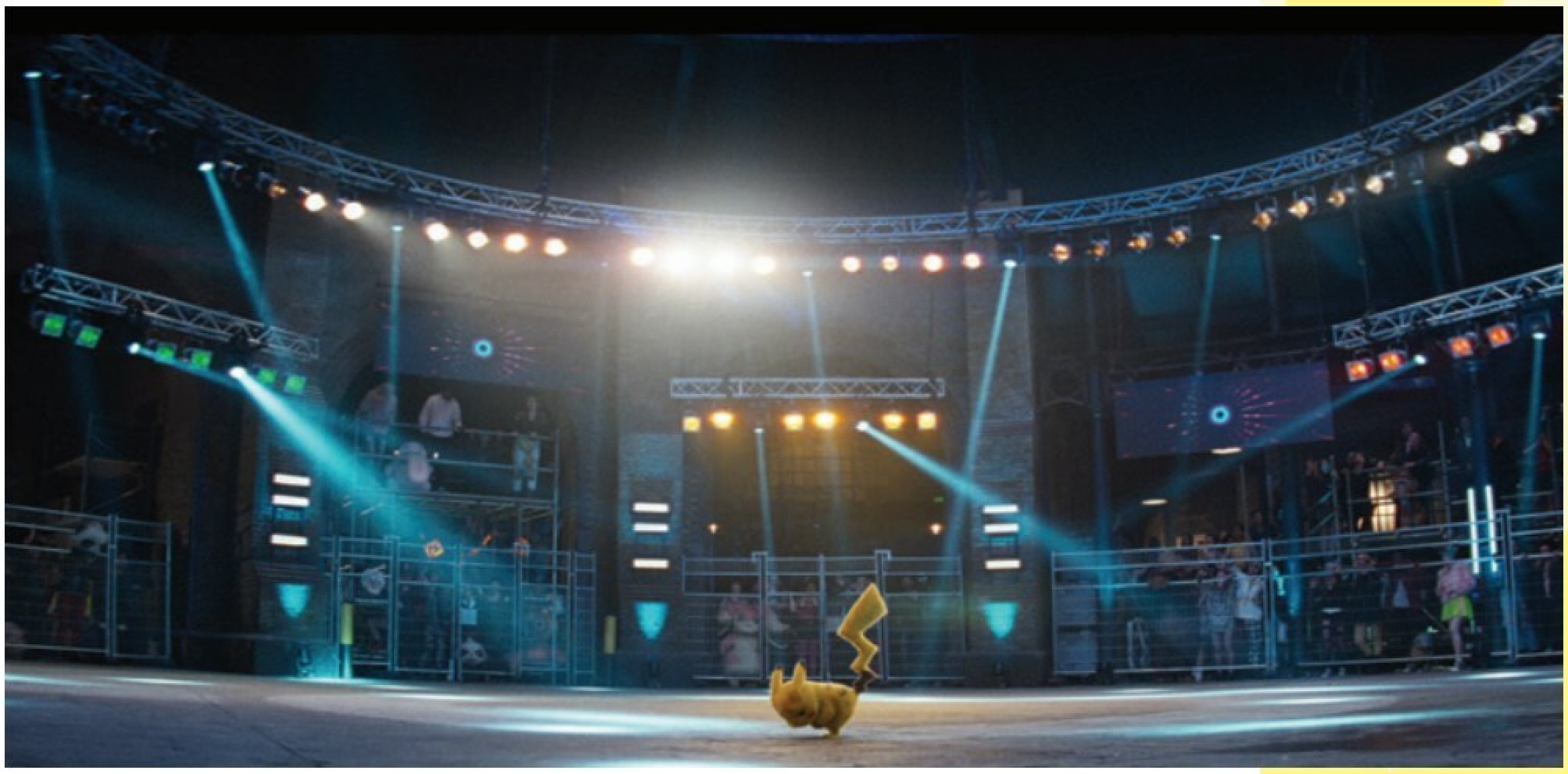

Omar Chaparro plays Sebastian, a famous pop singer in Ryme City, who's Charizard has a bone to pick with Detective Pikachu



sets. "You're designing and suddenly you will be like, 'Oh! Lickitung's got to get in there!' And he has to sit in that chair and his tummy goes out to here, so there is no way he is going to fit." Collins and his team would start with designing for humans, but would adapt the designs so they would make sense for the Pokémon denizens of the world.

That sense of Pokémon integration is a major part of the film and applied far beyond just the world design and background shots. "You might see a Machamp directing traffic. They're not too personified. They are still Pokémon, but they are integrated into the world in a kind of different way and natural way," says producer Cale Boyter. "We've really thought about all that and we want to make it as true to what it would actually be as possible."

The Shoot

The next stop was a visit to The Roundhouse set. Much of the movie takes place in Ryme City and follows protagonist Tim Goodman, played by Justice Smith, and Pikachu as they work together to uncover the story of Tim's father, who was supposedly murdered. Ryme City has outlawed Pokémon fighting, but there is at least one sequence that takes place in an underground arena called The Roundhouse. In the movie's first two trailers, you can see portions of this scene with Pikachu fighting a massive Charizard as a circle of onlookers cheer. The set was densely packed with extras decked out in the kind of clothes you would expect from someone who attends underground Pokémon fights to be wearing. The wardrobe reminded me of Team Skull from Pokémon Sun and Moon, but I didn't see any specific logos referencing Sun and Moon's goofy villains. For each take, the movie's assistant director would call over a loudspeaker for elements like sparks to fall from the ceiling, or smoke to erupt from a separate corner of the set.

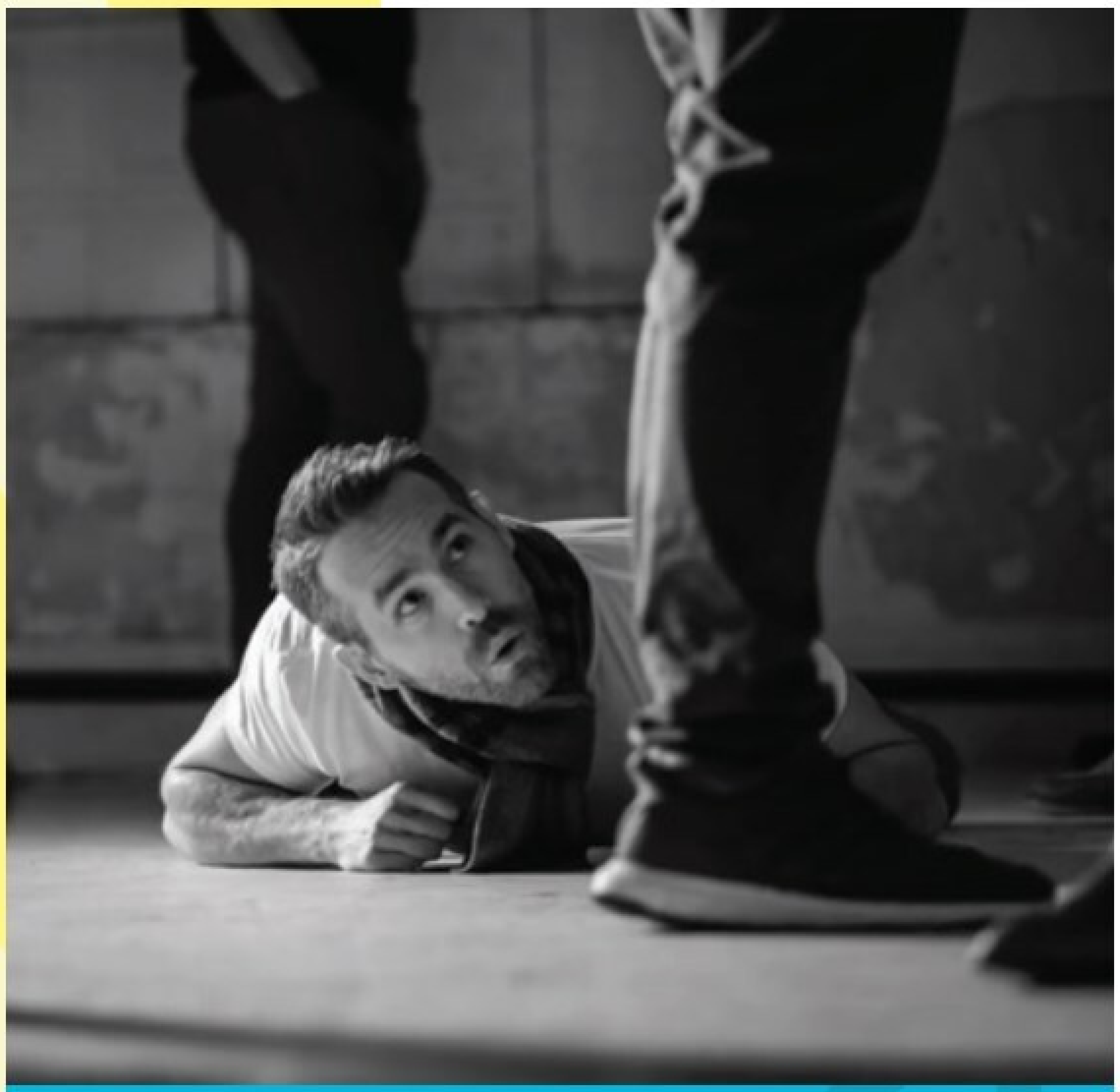
Along with the extras there were also folks to the side dressed head to toe in green leotards. After a few takes, one of the guys dressed in green hauled a giant rubber Magikarp to the center of the arena and pantomimed it flopping around on the ground. Another carried a life-size, fur-covered Pikachu puppet into the middle of the arena, and yet another carried a stick with a large ball covered with realistic Charizard textures on the end. They held them up, rotating each in every direction. All these elements will later be replaced with digital versions, but this was done to give the animators a sense of how the real-world lighting would look on the textures of the Pokémon.

In the scene being shot, Goodman was leaping to catch a falling Pikachu. I watched him leap headfirst on to a mat on the ground with his arms outstretched a few times, and then he did a few softer leaps without the mat. From there I moved on to chat with the actors and other members of the production team.

JUNICHI MASUDA ON DETECTIVE PIKACHU

During E3 2018, while catching up with longtime Pokémon producer, composer, and director Junichi Masuda about Let's Go, Pikachu and Eevee, we asked him his personal thoughts on the Pokémon Detective Pikachu movie. "All I can say is I am super excited to see how they put Pokémon in a setting that looks so realistic, and also they're filming in London so to have that really awesome city as a backdrop and to see how they make that all work together in a live action movie, and what kind of movie it's going to be," Masuda says. "I am just excited to see that myself."

Justice Smith (left), Rob Letterman (center), and Kathryn Newton (right) attended the 2018 Pokémon World Championships to reveal the film's logo



The Filmmakers

Rob Letterman, the director of the film, has a history in animation and directed the 2015 Goosebumps film. His relationship with Pokémon is through his children. “Before I got the call, I think I had spent thousands of dollars on buying the cards,” Letterman says. “Bespoke Mewtwo cards, importing them from Japan for my 11-year-old son who was obsessed.” His house is filled with Pokémon, so he was eager to take the job when it was offered. “I was like, ‘Yeah, I'll do that! That's my whole life!’ To this day my kids are freaking out about it.” Along with his kids' fandom, Letterman also liked the father-son story and was eager to bring Pokémon into a real-world setting. One way of doing that was to shoot on location and build sets. “We've designed a world that is based on reality so we're shooting a lot of locations,” Letterman says. “The storyline, and the actors, and the comedy is mature enough. We're not inventing this. This is what Marvel and Star Wars do all day long.”

Smith is best known for his roles in *The Get Down* and *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* and has a personal history with Pokémon. “My sister and I have all the original generation cards, and I used to watch the show all the time and we used to play the card game,” Smith says. “I had my favorite Pokémon. It was Totodile, and I had a little Totodile figurine that I would carry with me everywhere I went. When I got this job it was like a childhood dream come true.” Smith says Gold was his first video game entry into Pokémon and was playing Crystal at the time, having recently received it

WHAT ABOUT RYAN REYNOLDS?

Ryan Reynolds was not on set when we visited, as his involvement in the film happened during pre- and post-production, but we spoke with others on set about his role. For VFX producer Greg Baxter, it started with getting Reynolds in and having him read through the whole script while wearing a head-mounted camera to give the animators something to work with. “As he is delivering any joke or any line, you will get some Ryan Reynolds' facial movements, even though the face is very different, obviously,” Baxter says.

Reynolds also spent time with Justice Smith before shooting began in order to figure out their characters' relationship. “We did a week-long session where me and Ryan just went through the whole film and played around with what I would do on the day,“ Smith says. “I got to see how he was going to improvise, and just generally remember the dynamic that I had with him so I could recreate it on set. He's so funny. He's the funniest guy, and really sweet and down-to-earth. A creative genius.”

Boyter had similar compliments about Reynolds. “I think he just got it right away. He read the script. He understood what the character was and it fit so naturally into what he does beautifully,“ Boyter says.

Justice Smith plays the film's protagonist, Tim Goodman

as a gift from his girlfriend. He also excitedly recalled playing Pokémon Snap with his sister. Despite the obvious fandom, he says it was more than the brand that convinced him to do the film. He liked the story. "I feel the film wouldn't necessarily work if it was just a showcase of our childhood nostalgia," Smith says. He recalls getting choked up during his first viewing of the original Pokémon animated movie when Ash turned to stone and says that actually helped influence his decision to take the film. "The idea of friendship. The idea of losing someone dear to you? That was really the main reason I signed on for it."

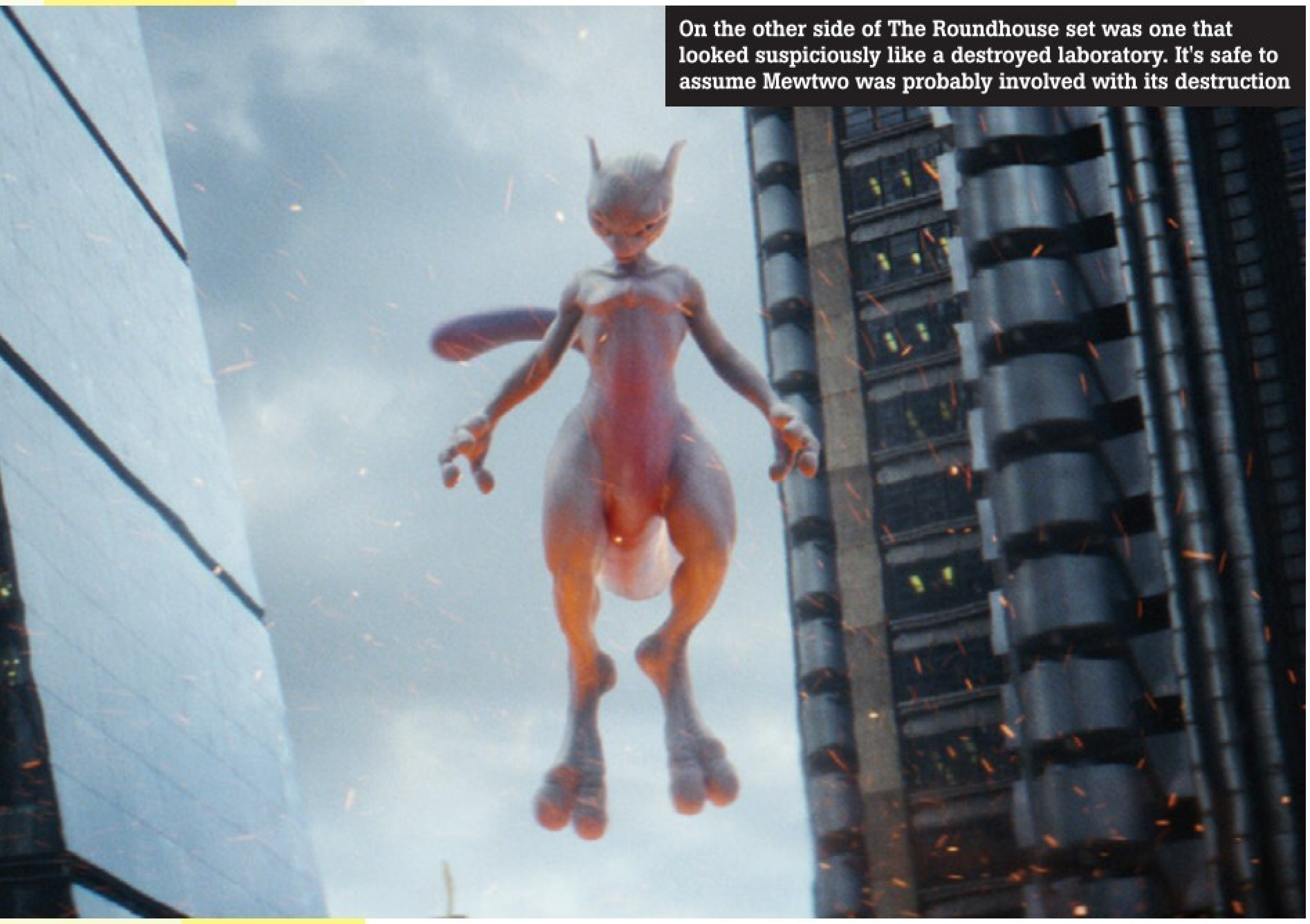
Kathryn Newton plays Lucy Stevens, who teams up with Tim in order to help him solve the mystery surrounding his father's death. Newton is perhaps most recognized as Claire on *Supernatural* and was in the 2018 comedy *Blockers*. Like Smith, Newton also grew up with Pokémon. Newton recalls playing the games on both Game Boy and Game Boy Advance and says the anime helped encourage her to become an artist. "It actually got me into drawing and I would draw the Pokémon, which got me into drawing anime characters," Newton says. She was even more excited about the film after learning what kind of character Lucy is. "I have been working since I was four and I thought, 'This is the best role for someone my age that I have come across in my lifetime!' We'll see what's next, but right now Lucy is pretty awesome," Newton says.

DANNY DEVITO

Before Detective Pikachu the video game was even localized for North America, the internet wanted to see Danny DeVito voice Pikachu. When the film was announced the internet's fervor for DeVito-Pikachu only grew, but the role went to Ryan Reynolds. We asked Producer Cale Boyter if they were aware of the demand and whether or not he was considered. "We definitely thought about it and how it might inform the spirit of it. Danny is incredible by the way. I am a huge fan of Danny DeVito," Boyter says.

When they were thinking about who to cast as Pikachu, VFX producer Greg Baxter says he and his team took lines from assorted actors' past roles and animated an early version of Pikachu to the audio to see how it looked. Danny DeVito was one of the actors they did a test for. "It was really very funny, so I couldn't speak to all the reasons why it wasn't Danny DeVito cast," Baxter says. "I love Danny and some point maybe after the movie comes about, we can share those early tests. It's absolutely hilarious."

Boyter also offered up a strange, cryptic tease saying, "I can't give away too much, but in terms of where the story goes and how it evolves, we had to sort of look at everything, including what fans weren't seeing yet, to make the decision. But that spirit of Danny DeVito, I promise you, is still inside of Pikachu."



On the other side of The Roundhouse set was one that looked suspiciously like a destroyed laboratory. It's safe to assume Mewtwo was probably involved with its destruction

Kathryn Newton plays Lucy, a journalist with a Psyduck partner who helps Tim

Why Now?

Despite the global reach and popularity of Pokémon, producer Cale Boyter says it was the arrival of a worthwhile story that created the opportunity for a live action Pokémon movie. "Detective Pikachu is the 'why' now. It really provided for us a great way into a live action version of this world. Whenever we approach these movies, especially when you have an IP or a brand that is beloved or has a legacy like Pokémon has, you really want story to drive it," Boyter says. The Detective Pikachu game focuses more on story than the typical Pokémon game, and it has a simple, relatable father-son hook driving it. "I think, also, for The Pokémon Company, this is their brand. It's over 20 years old. They know it better than anyone in the world and, smartly, they really felt like we need to do this and we need to take that leap at the right moment and we all agreed that Detective Pikachu gave us that," Boyter says.

The Pokémon Company was involved early on with the film. Boyter affirms it has been a true collaborator from the start. When asked if Pokémon's creators have shut down any ideas or flatly denied certain elements from being in the film Boyter says, "They're really not like that. We have been talking to them several times a week, three-hour-long video conferences between L.A. and Tokyo. We've been going back and forth for over a year now."

ESPRESSO
T WEEK

Will It Work?

Movies based on video games have historically been bad. Pleasing both the superfans and appealing to newcomers is always tricky when adapting a property, and the people behind the film understand this. "We should bring this into the real world and make sure this project is for everyone," says director Letterman. "Not only do we have to service the hardcore fans and be authentic to the Pokémon universe, but we have to bring in the uninitiated to this world so they can enjoy it." For the longtime fans, a Pokémon City with no fighting is strange. When asked whether elements like Poké Balls would be appearing in the film, Boyter pleaded the fifth, not wanting to spoil anything, but supervising art director Ben Collins confirmed we won't see things like Pokémon Gyms. Kathryn Newton, however, says the film absolutely acknowledges the larger established Pokémon universe, calling out things like the evolutionary stones that Pokémon fans will absolutely appreciate.

Ahead of its May 10 release, the film's trailers have inspired confidence. The animation of the Pokémon looks great with their realistic features and Reynolds' humor seems like a good, if strange, fit. My time on the set also inspired confidence thanks to a genuine sense of fandom for the Pokémon property from everyone I spoke to. "There are so many opportunities inside the Pokémon universe, and of course they're all incredibly exciting. It's Pokémon – of course you want to explore all of them," Boyle says. "I think everyone is thinking creatively, we want to nail this one and then let's see where it goes." ◆

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GOOGLE'S GAMING GAMBIT

The internet giant steps into the ring with new stream-based gaming platform Stadia

by Brian Shea

Delivering a keynote address at this year's Game Developers Conference, Google shared its vision for the future of video games. The tech company painted a picture of gaming without technical limitations, where anyone could experience the highest-quality games without having to own high-end technology. The answer Google provided to achieve this is Stadia, the company's new streaming-based gaming platform.

According to Google CEO Sundar Pichai, the idea comes from one of Google's philosophies: that technology should adapt to people, not the other way around. "We've been building towards this vision for some time," Pichai said in the keynote address. "For example, when we launched Chrome a decade ago, we envisioned that it could be a modern platform for web applications and bring the power of web to everyone, including use-cases that seemed impossible at the time, like high-quality games."

Last year, Google dipped its toe in the water with Project Stream, a small-scale public test that let people play Assassin's Creed Odyssey using a Chrome browser. While we experienced some minor hiccups with both graphical fidelity and input latency during our hands-on time with Project Stream, we came away impressed with the overall the experience. It allowed gamers to play the graphically intensive Ubisoft title on devices that wouldn't stand a chance of running it locally. More importantly, however, it was a promising proof of concept for Google's new vision.

The Project Stream technical test was the first time the public got a glimpse of Google's work on game-streaming technology, which Pichai says has been ongoing for the past two years. With the announcement of Stadia, the internet giant seems all in on its mission statement of building a game platform for everyone.

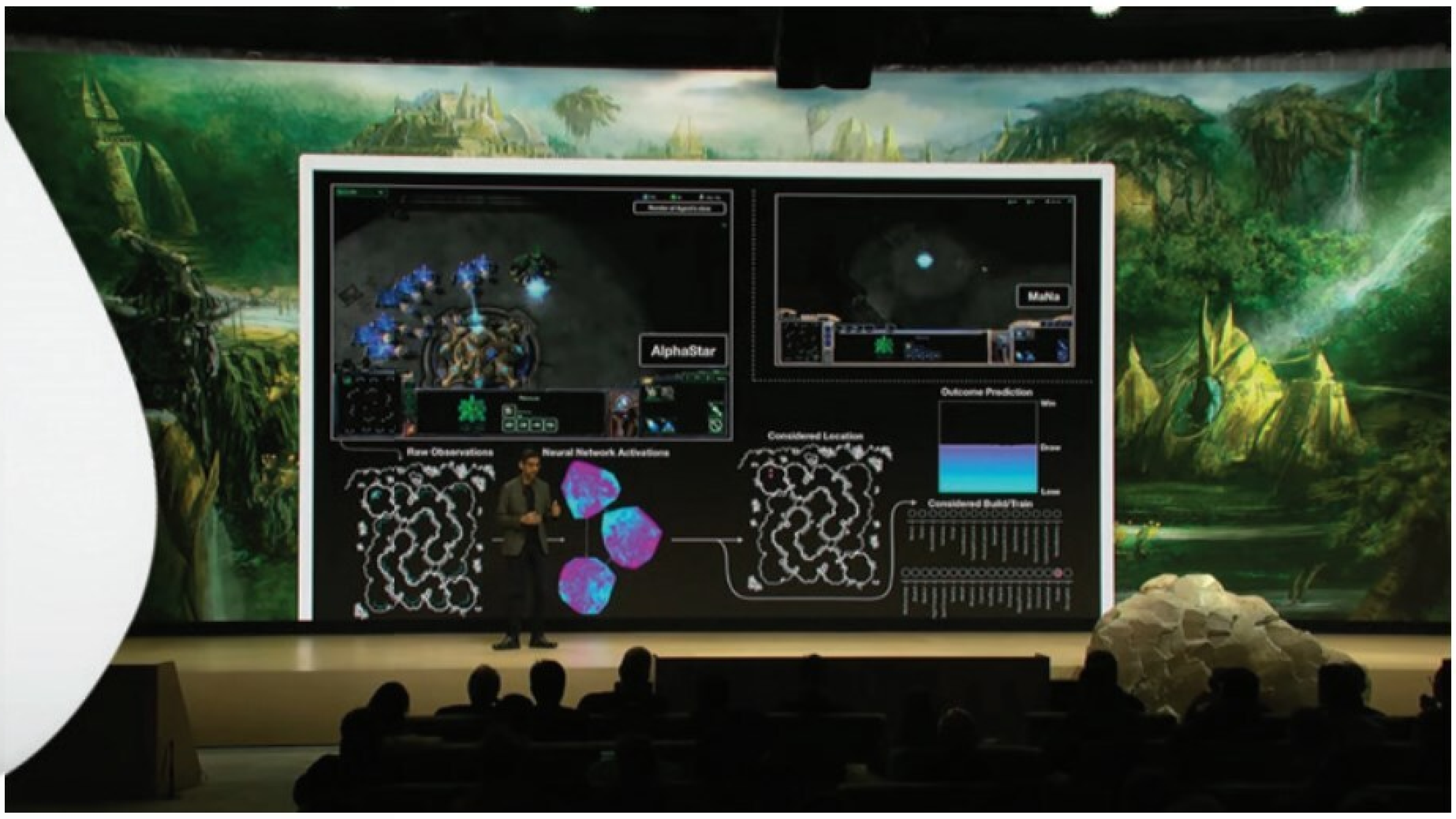
Stadia hopes to deliver 4K gaming at 60 frames per second to more than 2 billion people thanks to Google's powerful data center network, which covers more than 200 countries. Google claims if you have a good YouTube experience today, you'll have a good Stadia experience when it launches. To achieve 4K and 60 FPS, Google recommends 30 mbps download speeds.

Stadia works regardless of the device, letting even low-end PCs, tablets, phones, and smart televisions play the games as long as they have a strong internet connection and access to the Chrome browser. Leveraging the Google network, Stadia operates at 10.7 GPU teraflops, which is more powerful than the PS4 (4.2 GPU teraflops) and Xbox One X (6.0 GPU teraflops) combined. In the future, Google wants to explore additional platforms and browsers, as well as 8K resolution running at 120 frames per second.

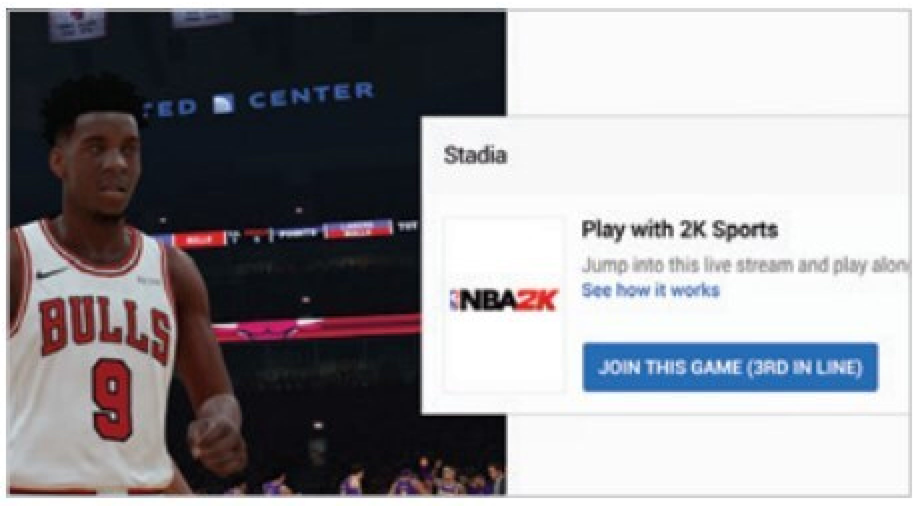
Play on devices
you already have

The Controller

While Stadia will work with existing USB gamepads, Google has also designed its own controller that connects directly to the game through Wi-Fi. In addition to the industry-standard buttons and layout, the Stadia controller features a capture button for sharing footage, as well as a Google Assistant button and microphone, allowing you to ask an A.I. assistant questions like how to beat a part you're stuck on without having to leave the game or reach for another device.



DOOM
ETERNAL


CENTER
BULLS
9
Stadia
NBA2K
Play with 2K Sports
Jump into this live stream and play alon
See how it works
JOIN THIS GAME (3RD IN LINE)

The public isn't the only group Google needs to get on board for its new platform. Part of the company's pitch to developers is Google's strong knack for discoverability, centered on the platform's YouTube integration. Stadia connects directly with Google's industry-leading video service, and will reportedly not only allow players to easily stream gameplay, but also let viewers seamlessly join their multiplayer sessions.

In addition, those who are enjoying these streams on YouTube can click a new "Play Now" button and instantly jump into the game for themselves with little loading and no required installations or updates. "Think about the way the web works: You can easily share a link, and it works seamlessly," Pichai said. "We want games to feel that way too: instantly enjoyable, with access for everyone."

Streamers, developers, and players can also use State Share to let others drop into a specific moment they encountered or designed, with specific parameters from the shared state down to elements like the sharing player's inventory. Developer Q-Games announced it is currently working on a new game based on State Share technology.

Google has already touted partnerships with game makers like Bethesda, Ubisoft, Take-Two, Tequila Works, and Q-Games, but the company went a step further, hiring former Ubisoft and EA executive Jade Raymond to found Stadia Games and Entertainment to create exclusive content for the platform.

"If we can bring games that are familiar in a very good way on Stadia and bring games that are new that really deliver on the promise of 'your platform is a data center,' then gamers, we hope over time, will see that this is what a true new generation platform looks like," Google VP and GM Phil Harrison tells us.

Google also says Stadia supports cross-platform play, and can even migrate saves over from other platforms. However, cross-platform initiatives like these always require both parties' participation and involvement to work.

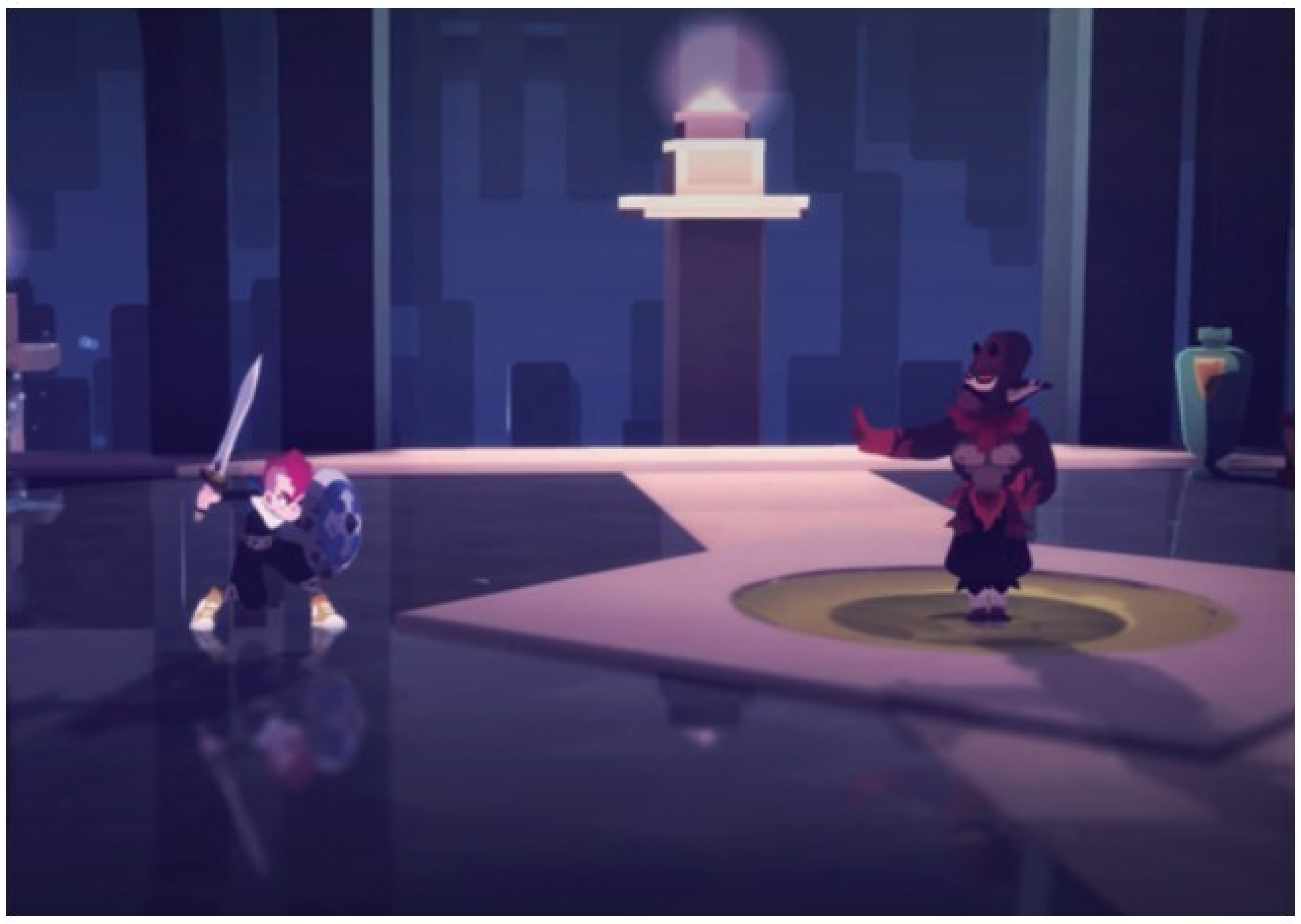
Despite the ambitious pitches made by Google, a number of concerns temper our enthusiasm for this new technology. When we played Doom on Stadia in a controlled environment, we experienced noticable input lag. While it was far from gamebreaking, it did make a fast-paced, reflex-based game like Doom more difficult. Furthermore, it makes us worry that if Google is unable to eliminate input latency in a best-case scenario environment, how will it do so with so many variables in the wild? Additionally, many portions of the United States still do not possess the internet infrastructure to support a stream-based game platform, and the increasing prevalence of internet service provider-imposed data caps could further deter players from abandoning local media.

Stadia is set to launch later in 2019, so we don't have to wait long for answers to some of these questions. Only time will tell if Stadia is the future of gaming, or even a part of the future of gaming. For now, it's a hefty investment and an ambitious leap by one of the planet's leading tech companies.

The Indie Games Of GDC 2019

The annual Game Developers Conference has once again proven to be one of the best times to get a glimpse at the future of the indie game scene. Amid a bevy of awesome projects, here are some of our favorites that were on display.

by Game Informer Staff



Young Souls

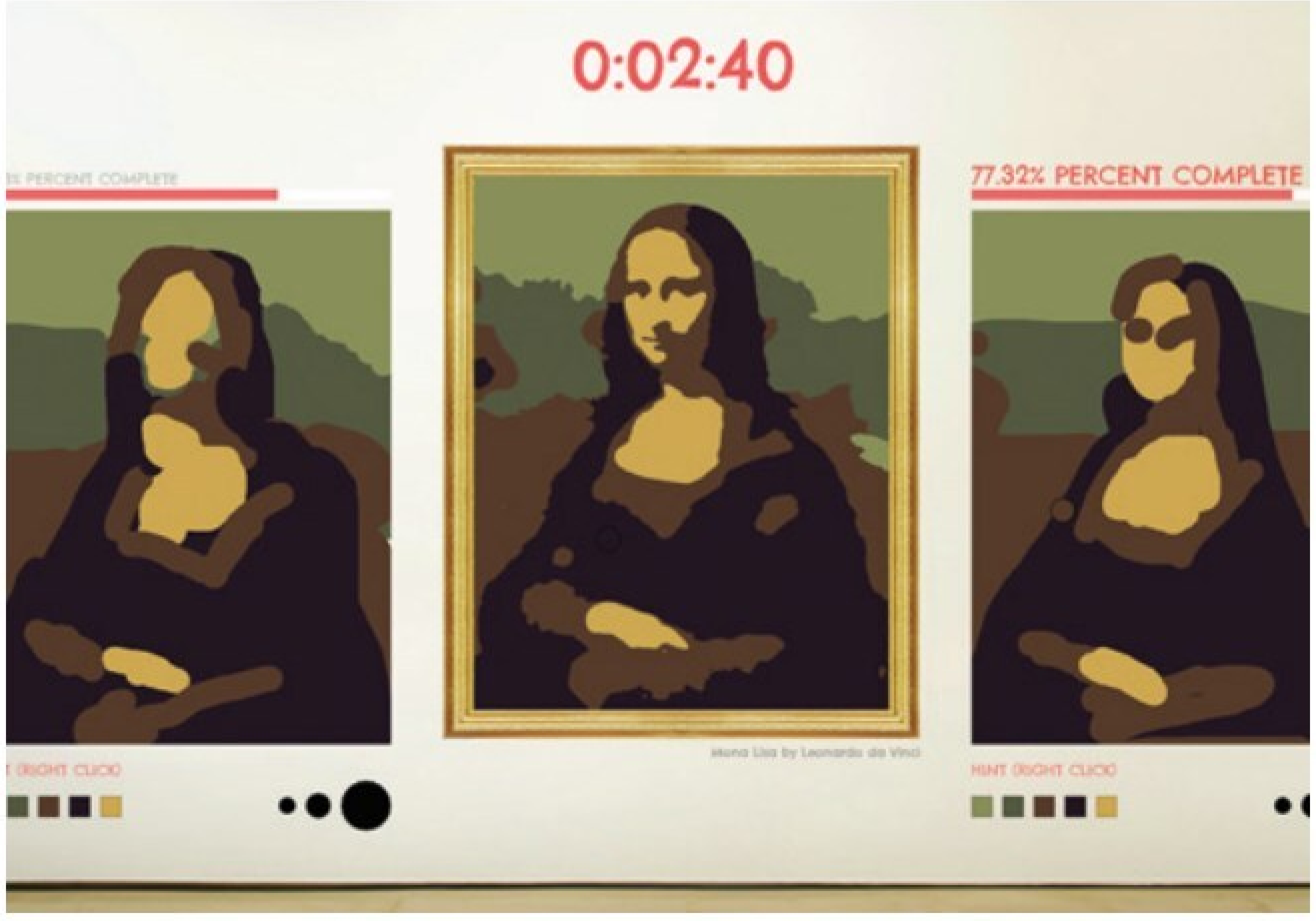
Platform: TBA

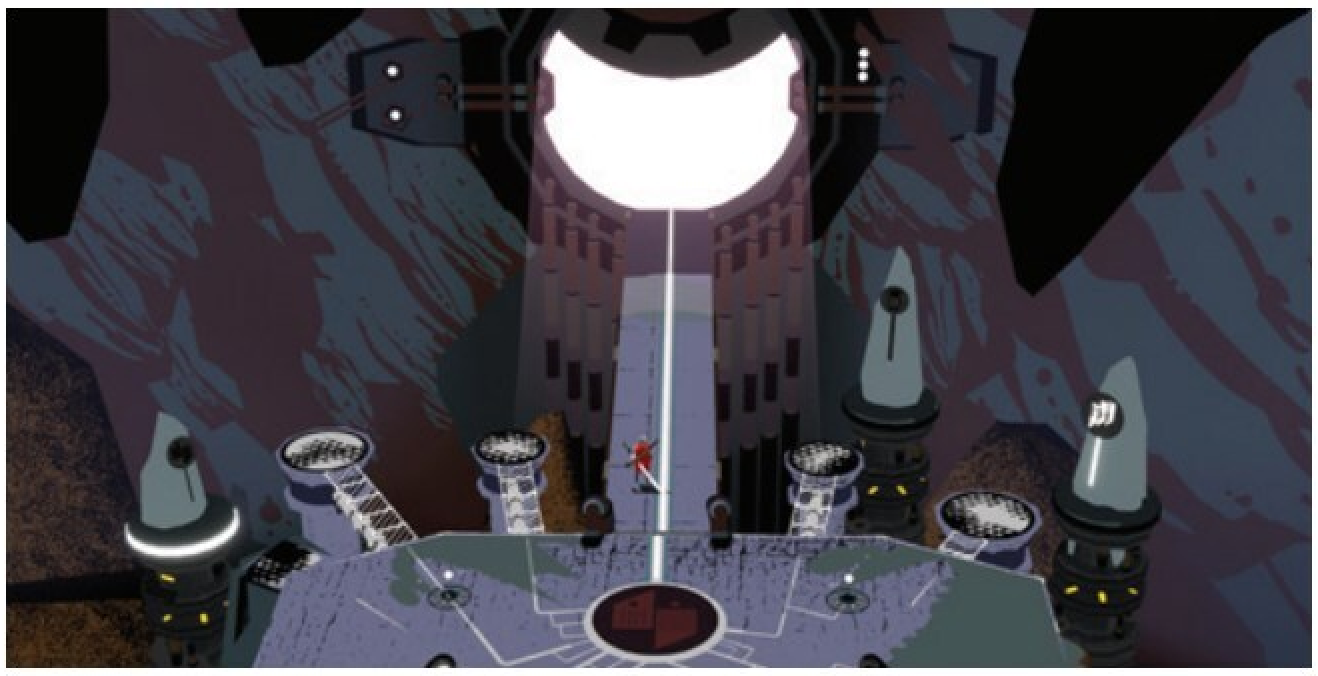
Part of The Arcade Crew, an initiative from French developer DotEmu to publish and shepherd indie games with strong arcade roots and mentalities, Young Souls immediately attracts anyone passing by with its eye-catching art style. The co-op dungeon crawler plays almost as well as it looks, blending tried-and-true 2D brawler mechanics with RPG and loot elements. Teens Jenn and Tristan find portals to a fantasy world of dungeons and go in equipped with all manner of weaponry to clear the area out, donning different armor depending on the monsters they will be fighting ahead, requiring that players exercise strategy in how they tackle the challenges. The dramatic camera angles and fun animations give Young Souls an air of both teenage rebellion and striking fantasy.

Sloppy Forgeries

Platform: PC • Mac • iOS

Fans of Drawful and Draw Something have a new party game to look forward to in Jonah Warren's Sloppy Forgeries. This two-player competitive local multiplayer experience pits wannabe artists against one another as they rush to recreate famous paintings like the *Mona Lisa*, *Starry Night*, *The Scream*, *La Danse*, and *Whistler's Mother* using a mouse or touchpad. Their forgeries are made all the more hilarious considering they must work under the constraints of a timer to replicate the masterpieces. The winner is determined by a pixel comparison that judges if the right colors are used in the right places, and watching the percentage of correct pixels climb and fall with master strokes and terrible decisions adds to the hilarity for the peanut gallery watching players rush to mimic these works of art. Look for the game this summer.





Creature in the Well

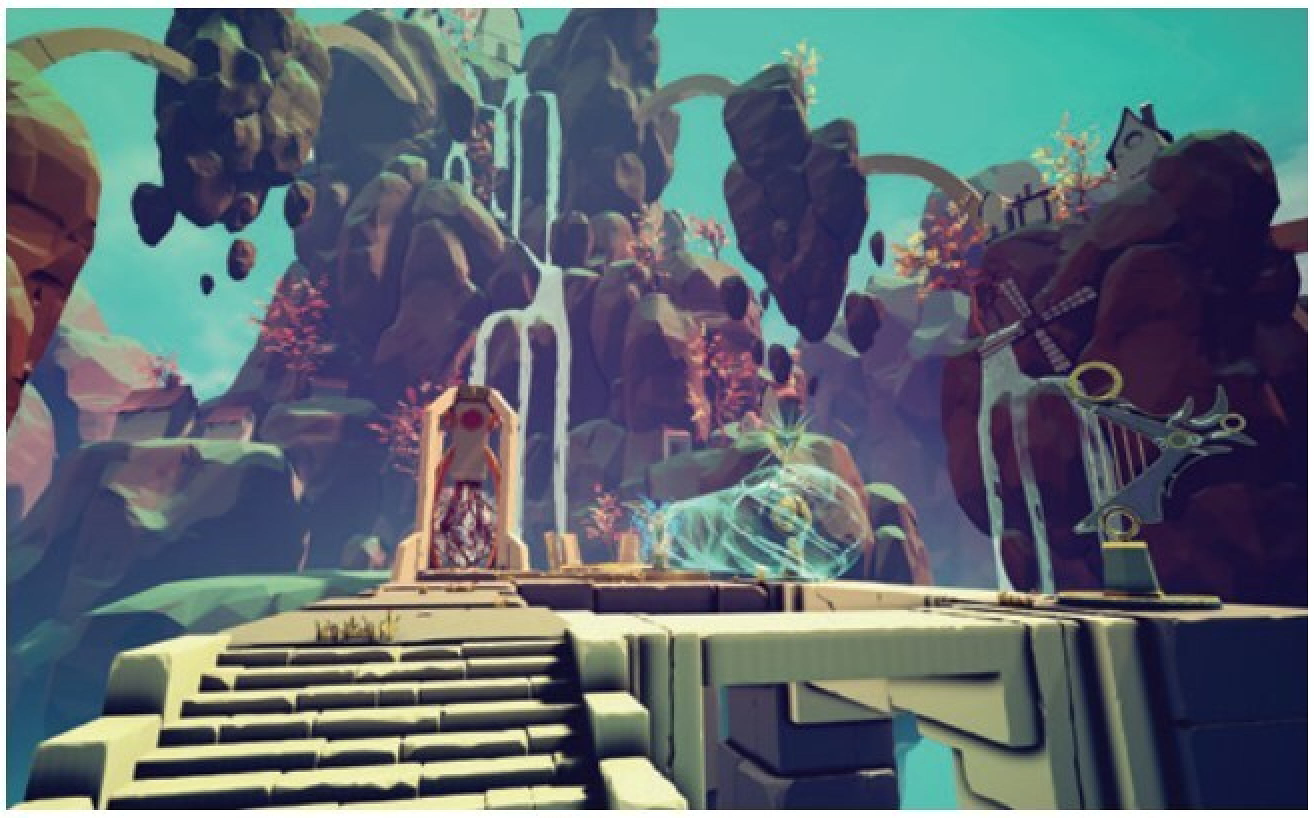
Platform: Switch

Inspired by pinball tables and other games like Breakout, a small team of two developers has created a visually unique action game that asks players to slap balls of energy around the screen. You are the last robot tasked with powering a machine that can control the weather, and you must get the engine up and running again to dispel a sandstorm that has decimated the world. Unfortunately, a giant creature lurks inside the guts of this machine and it is ready to ruin your day. Your little robot can attack balls of energy, which powers them up before launching them across the room. Ultimately, you want to use these balls to power energy nodes scattered across each room. These nodes look like pinball bumpers, and once activated they open new doors and help you solve puzzles. Throughout your journey, you'll also acquire a wide variety of weapons that help you better aim your energy orbs, power-up your attacks, and even split balls in half. Creature in the Well's action is frantic and smooth, and its painterly aesthetic and haunted atmosphere is intriguing. Hopefully the final product comes together when it releases this summer.

The Sojourn

Platform: PC

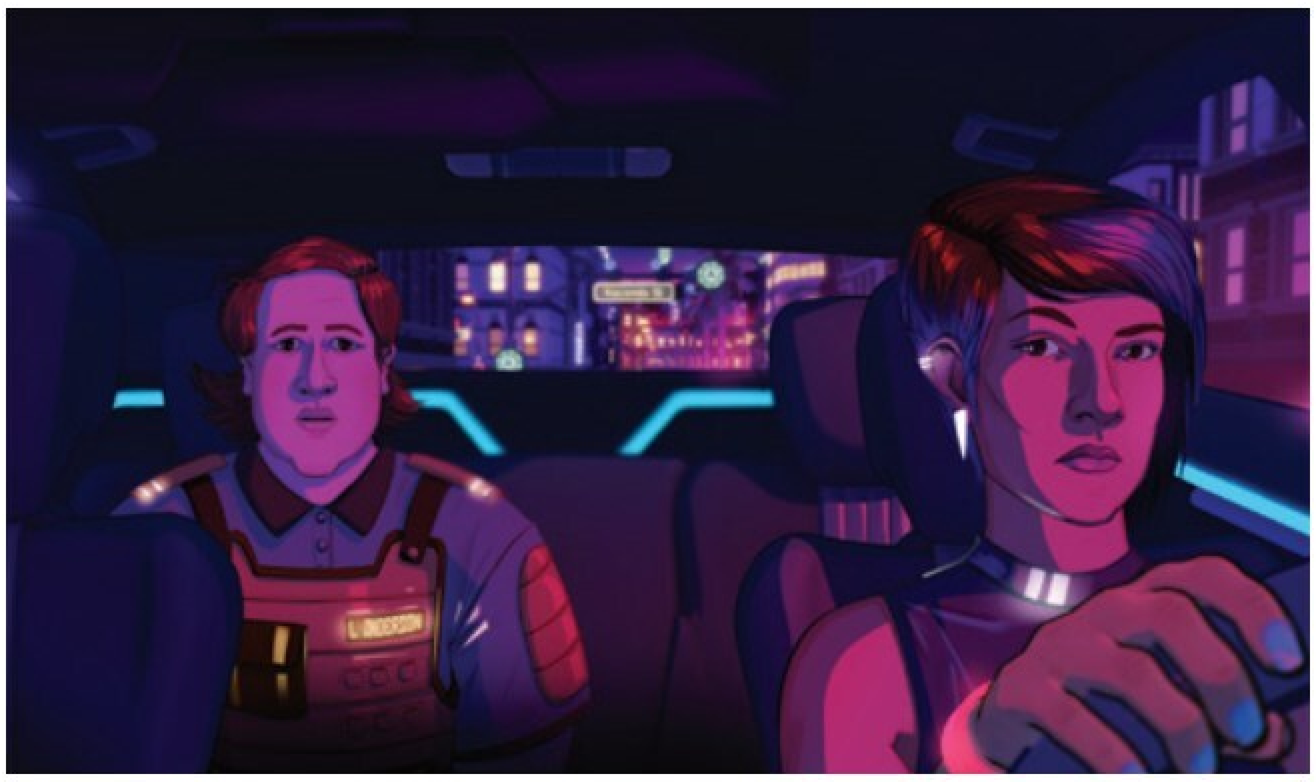
In the style of games like The Talos Principle and The Turing Test, The Sojourn is a first-person puzzle game from Shifting Tides that invites players to traverse multiple dimensions as they solve a series of environmental puzzles and ultimately discover the nature of reality itself. The story is told wordlessly through the environment. You are a child born into a kingdom that has been corrupted by darkness, but you have the ability to jump between the world of light and the world of darkness. You can use this skill to solve puzzles and slowly move deeper into your kingdom. Every time you jump into the dark world, you tap the ability to manipulate various stone statues scattered around. All of The Sojourn's puzzles involve manipulating these statues in various combinations, and different monoliths add new gameplay twists over time. Our early look at The Sojourn was promising, and this looks like one first-person puzzler worth keeping on your radar ahead of its release later this year.

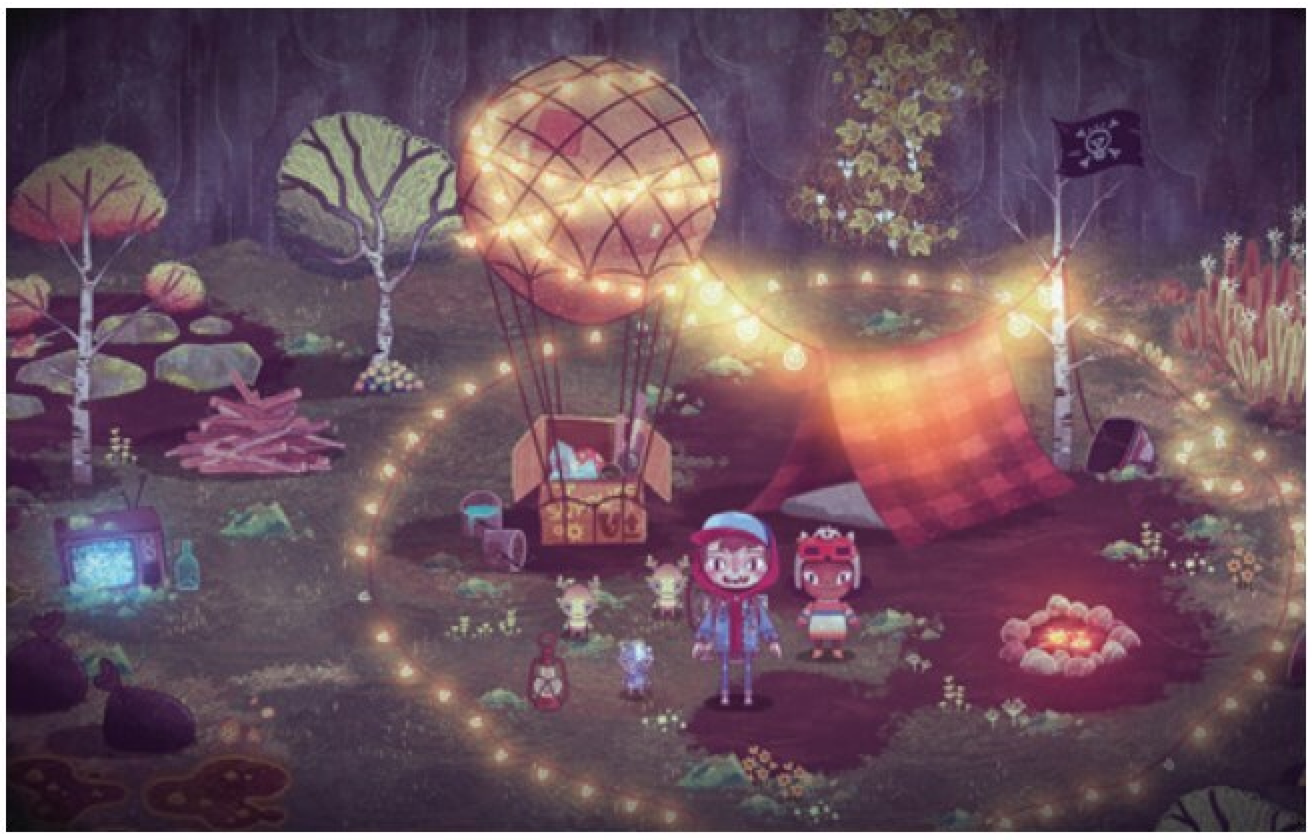


Neo Cab

Platform: PC

In this narrative-driven game set in the near future, you play as the last human driver for a rideshare service in a world that revolves around automation. As Lina, you must pick up customers, keep your emotions in check, and do whatever you can to keep your five-star rating. Challenges also include making sure you have enough money coming in to keep your gas tank full and cover the occasional mishap, such as a parking ticket. Balancing your own needs is just as difficult. Do you sleep to improve your physical state, or take on more rides for extra cash? Do you compromise your own feelings and opinions for the sake of pleasing a customer? These are just some of the choices in your hands, and your emotional state can change the options before you. For instance, if you're depressed, you won't be able to choose the flirty option for customer conversations. Releasing at some point this year, Neo Cab explores the issues that may arise in an A.I.-controlled world and the importance of our humanity.

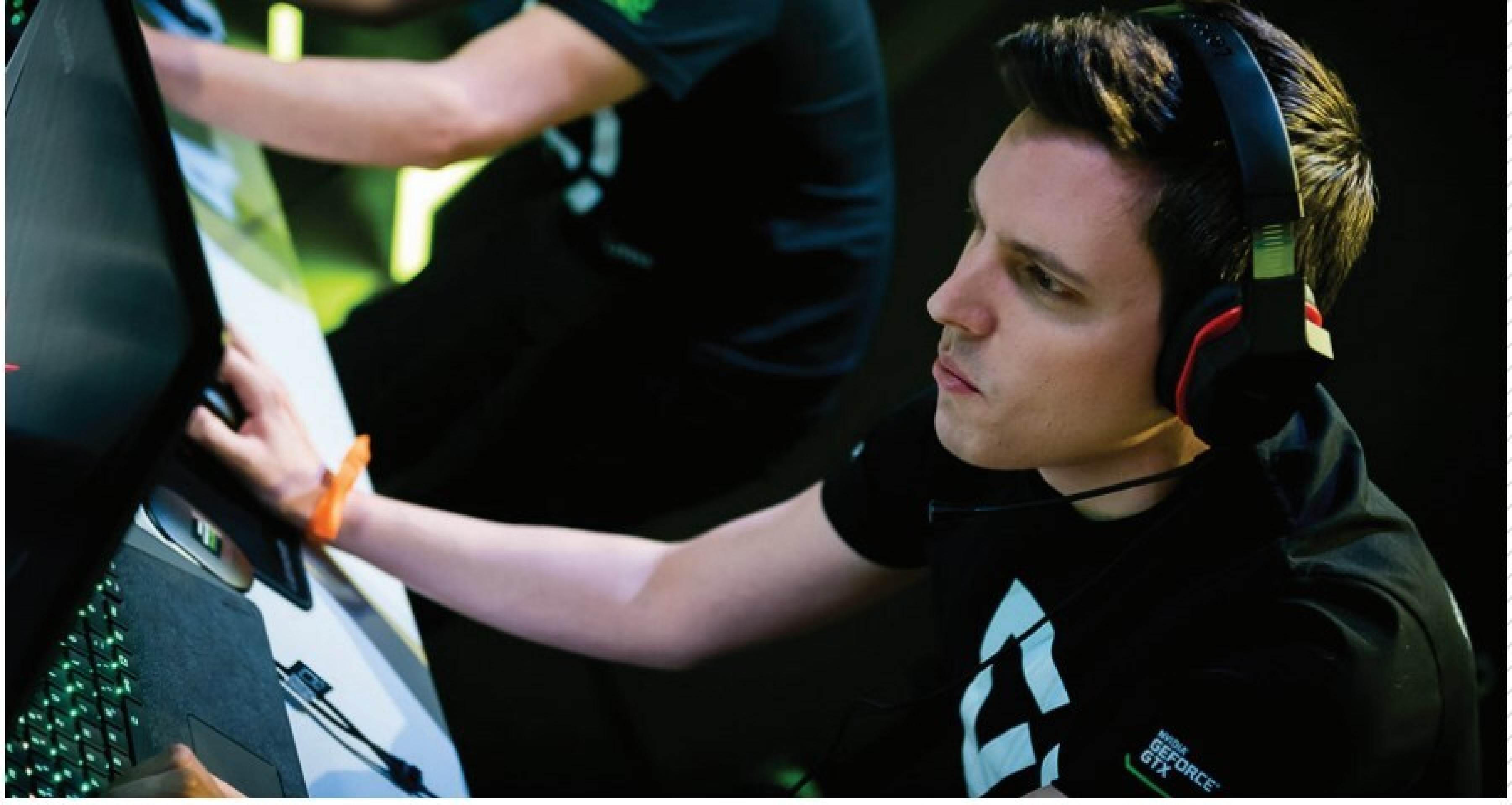




The Wild at Heart

Platform: Xbox One • PC

The Wild at Heart immediately catches the eye due to its beautiful, vibrant art style, reminiscent of Studio Ghibli and Saloon films (*Song of the Sea*, *The Secret of Kells*). The game has you playing as a boy named Wake, who has a troubled home life and ends up discovering a fantastical place with magical creatures when exploring the woods. It's up to you to discover the truth of this forgotten world and its inhabitants. To help the critters survive, Wake has his trusty Gutbuster to vacuum up objects for crafting, which lets you create everything from costumes to new tools. Similar to Pikmin, the creatures also help him through the journey. You can chuck them at enemies, send them to collect resources, or have them break down barriers to get further into the forest. There's a childlike wonder to discovering this world and befriending its strange inhabitants, and we can't wait to step in when it launches next year. ◆



Surviving To Thriving

Dropping cricket for Quake

While he once grinded at a 9-to-5 tech job only to go home to produce YouTube content, Sacriel changed everything when he dropped the daytime doldrums for streaming to over half a million followers. Earning his claim to fame by landing headshots and destroying the competition in DayZ and H1Z1, Sacriel now flourishes in a world where survival has gravitated towards big battle royales.

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Chris Ball
(Sacriel)

Website:
Sacriel.tv

Twitter:
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Twitch:
Twitch.tv/sacriel

YouTube:
YouTube.com/sacriel42

interview by Daniel Tack

First things first – how did you get your name?
World of Warcraft. I was rolling a Paladin, and I was like, "Oh, if I'm rolling a Paladin, I might as well have a [seraphim] angelic warrior name," and I literally just went on Google, searched "angelic names" and a big list came up, and Sacriel was like the third one or whatever. I was like, "Sacriel, ok..." I googled it, and pretty much nothing came up and I was like that's kinda unique then. I then rolled with that.

At the time I didn't think this, but now I think it's really important from a brand perspective to have something unique and Google-able. If you google Sacriel, you get loads of pictures of me, but if I called my channel Sniper Wolf, you're going to get characters from comics and games and pictures of a sniper and pictures of a wolf, so it turned out really useful for me.

Before all the streaming, how did you get into gaming? What was your first experience with games?
My dad got me into gaming a very long time ago. We used to have a Spectrum and a Commodore, and it wasn't a huge part of my life. But I would definitely rather be at home playing a game than playing like football or, to my dad's disappointment, cricket. He taught me to be a really good cricketer, but I would rather sit inside and code and play games.

When Quake came out, and then modern versions of Quake came out where there were all these different types of playing it, I started to get very good. I played with my friends and I'd beat them all the time, and they'd all ask me, "How did you do this? How did you do that?" And I'd sit there and explain to them, "This is how I did it."

So what did the road look like from Quake to now?
Back in the Quake days, that was around the time that I went to college, and I went to college to learn coding. And the goal of learning coding was so that I could make games, because I really like games. However, coming out of college with my qualifications for coding, back then there wasn't that much in the way of game companies out there asking for coders, so I ended up just having a normal job doing IT and stuff, and I kind just put the gaming on the backburner. I still played every spare minute, but I didn't really think of it as a career, and then the game Bad Company 2 came out. Bad Company 2 is a game that has very good sniping, very realistic sniping, there's lots of ballistics that you need to understand to be a good sniper in that game – it's not just point and click. I got really, really good at that sniping. And people would often call me a cheater. "Oh, how did you get a kill at 400m, that's cheating!" And I would type back to them, "No, it's not! I'm going to show you!" And so I started recording my Bad Company 2 sessions and then putting them up on YouTube.

So you're big on the whole battle royale revolution that we're experiencing right now.
Absolutely. One of my taglines is: 'It ruins my day if I'm not ruining someone else's day.' And that kind of really shines in DayZ where someone might spend 10 hours getting their gear together and, finally, they take the big hike up to the airfield and they're like, "Oh my God, I'm finally here" (bullet whizzing noise) and I shoot them in the head from 600 meters away and I'm like: "Oh, thanks for the jeans, mate."

Are we going to have another Apex moment in the next year? Is some other game going to come out of nowhere and contend, "Now we're the best battle royale?"
It happens in every genre, really. In card games, in MOBAs, in survival games. And I think that so many companies will be inspired by Apex because everyone just copy-pasted the PUBG thing, just changed the color and shape of the circle. Apex came out and, if you really think about it, what they've done isn't incredibly genius design: it's just, if your friend dies you can bring them back in.

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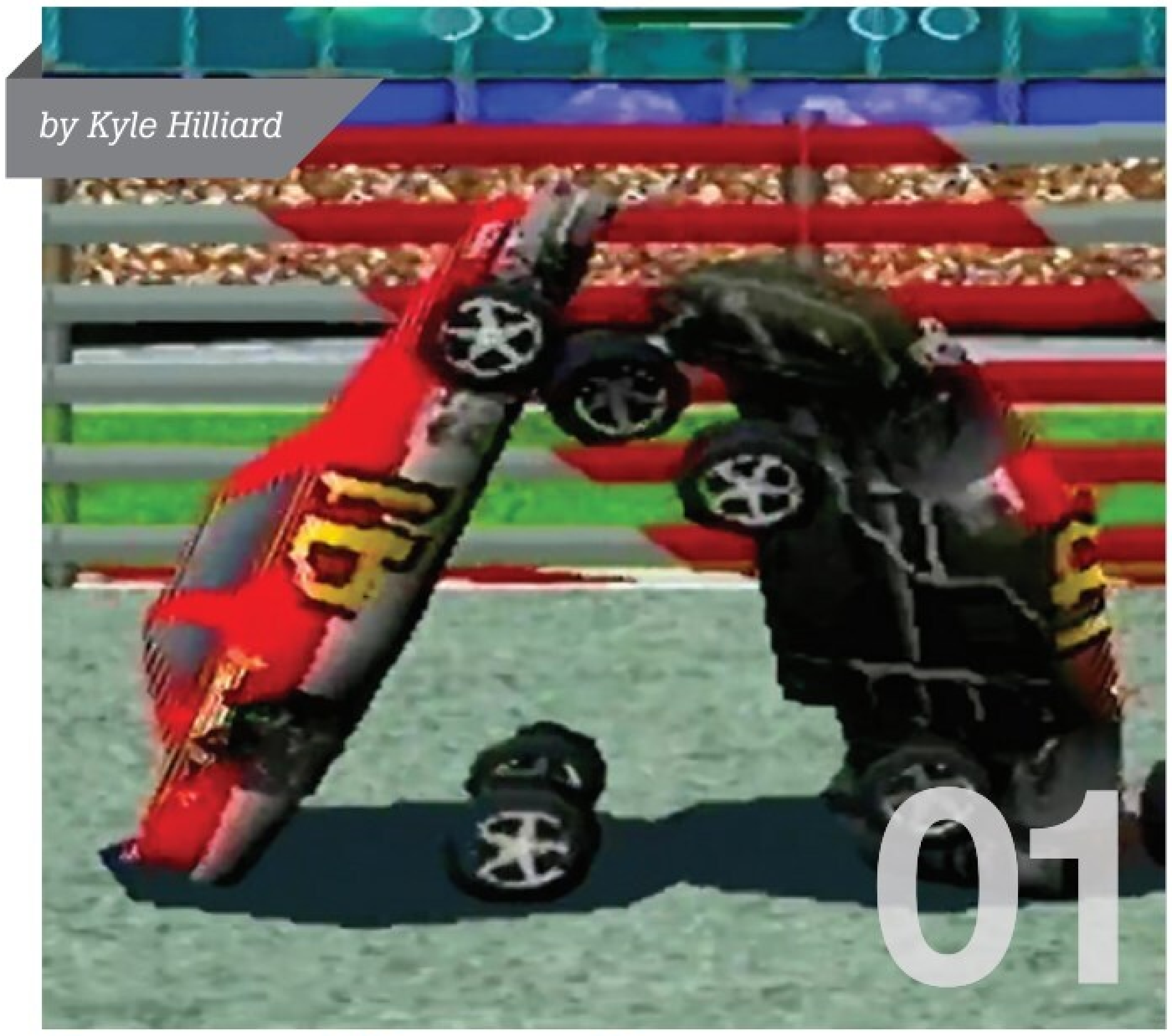
"Up to 50%" is based on a comparison of the monthly cost of the $45 Straight Talk Service Plan and the monthly cost for a single line on a comparable no-contract plan with unlimited talk, text and data on the top two carriers. Excludes taxes, fees, autopay discounts and limited time pricing. Source: Competitor websites, January 2019. †Actual availability, coverage and speed may vary. LTE is a trademark of ETSI. A month equals 30 days. *See terms and conditions at StraightTalk.com.

Only at Walmart

UNEXPECTED FIGHTERS

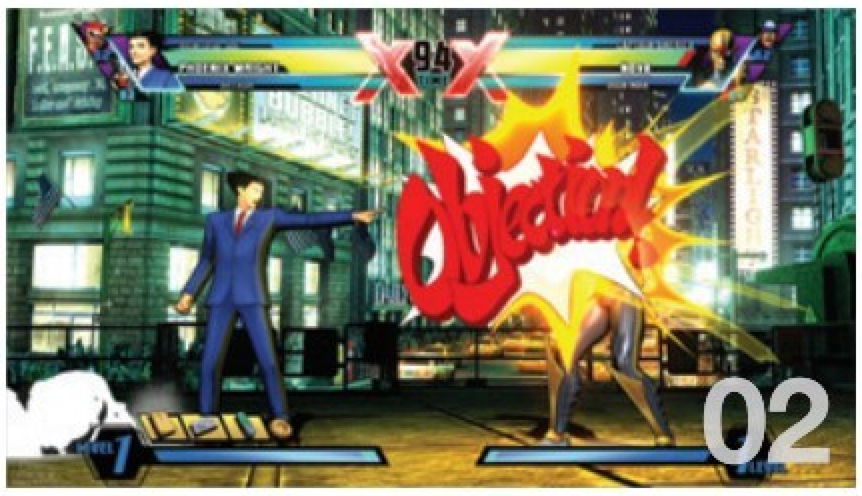
by Kyle Hilliard



Daytona Hornet Car

Fighters Megamix

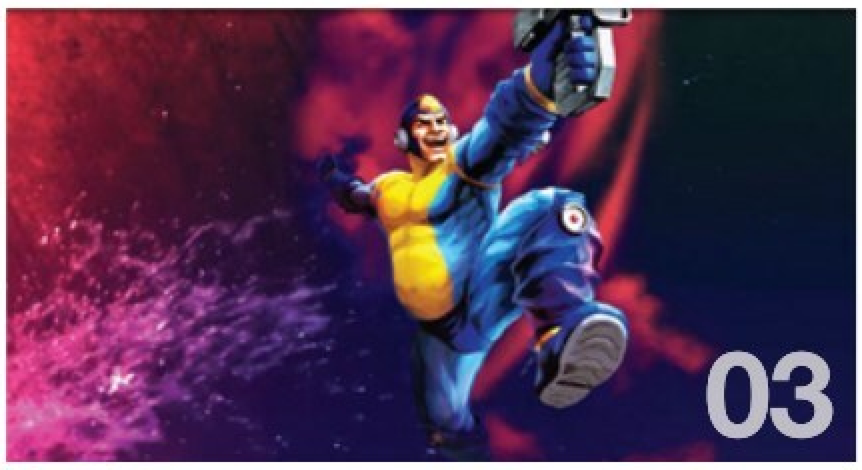
This Sega Saturn game has some of the weirdest fighters ever. You can unlock a slab of meat and even fight as the developer AM2's palm tree logo, but arguably its weirdest fighter is a Daytona USA car. Hornet rears up on its back wheels, boxes with its front wheels, and its shell can be knocked off to reveal the engine.



Phoenix Wright

Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3

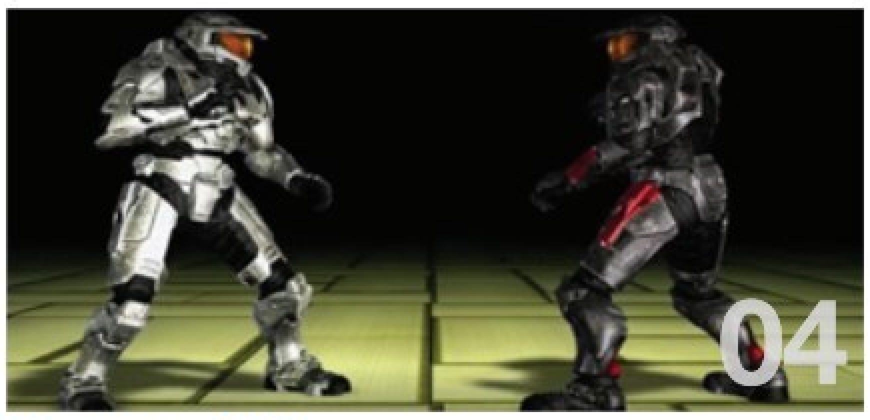
In a game full of heroes like Spider-Man and Hulk, gods and demons like Amaterasu and Dante, one fighter stands out as maybe not being the best suited for superpowered combat. Phoenix Wright is a lawyer whose only special ability is that of expert deduction.



Box Art Mega Man

Street Fighter X Tekken

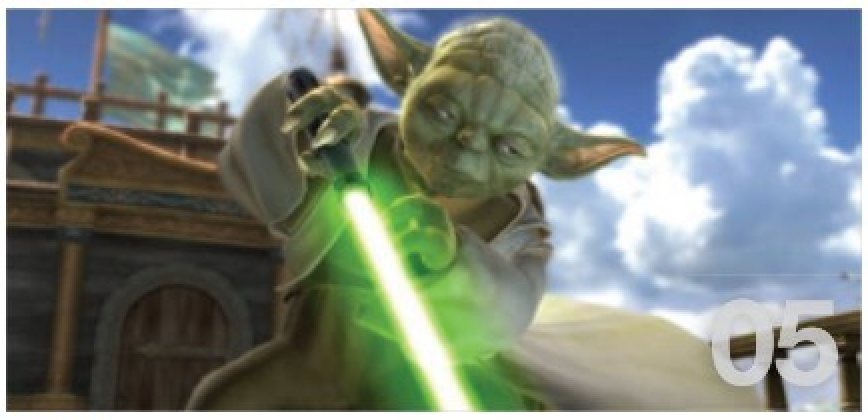
Mega Man's poorly drawn North American NES box art featured an awful rendition of the sci-fi hero holding a regular handgun. You'd think Capcom would do everything in its power to make people forget its existence, but instead it made this ugly version of Mega Man a fighter in Street Fighter X Tekken. We're thankful.



Spartan-458

Dead or Alive 4

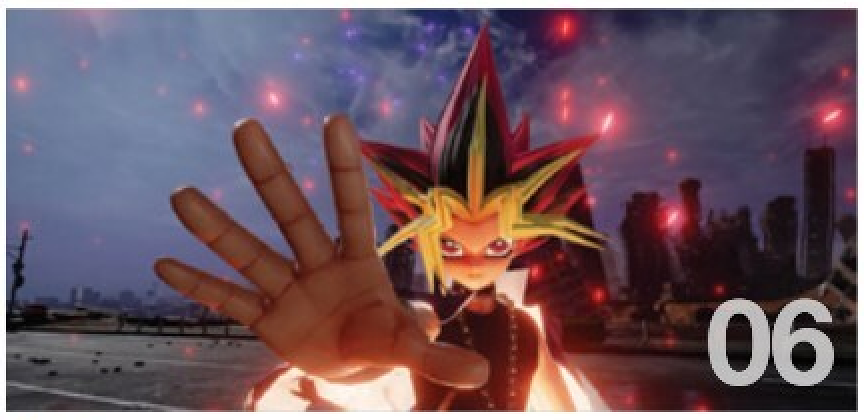
At the height of Halo's popularity, a Spartan made an unexpected cameo in this Japanese franchise. Beating every character's story in Dead or Alive 4 makes Spartan-458 (a.k.a. Nicole) a playable fighter. One of her special attacks attached a plasma grenade to her opponent's chest.



Yoda

Soulcalibur IV

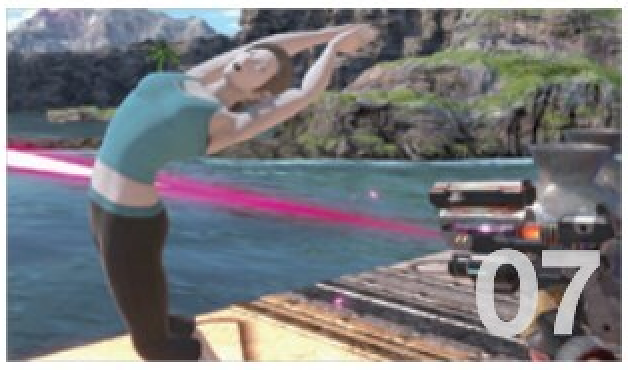
Soulcalibur is no stranger to cameos, and a few others were considered for this list. But in terms of weirdest and most unexpected, Yoda beats out even Link. He's half the height of all his opponents, which makes him incredibly tricky to use in a fight.



Yugi

Jump Force

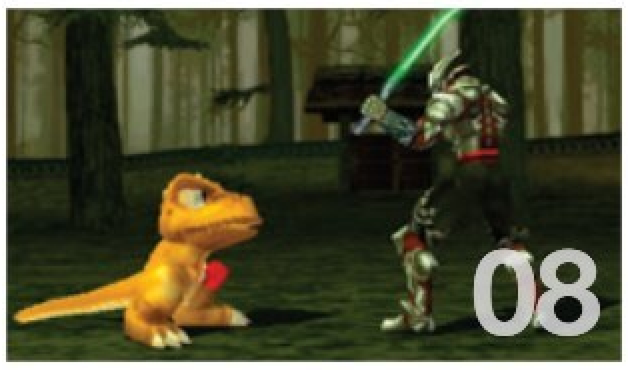
Jump Force is a Smash Bros.-style mashup of Shonen Jump characters, who are some of the strongest fighters in all of entertainment media. Yugi (and his Yu-Gi-Oh alter ego) is a card player, not a fighter. How he manages to survive a punch from Goku is beyond us.



Wii Fit Trainer

Super Smash Bros.

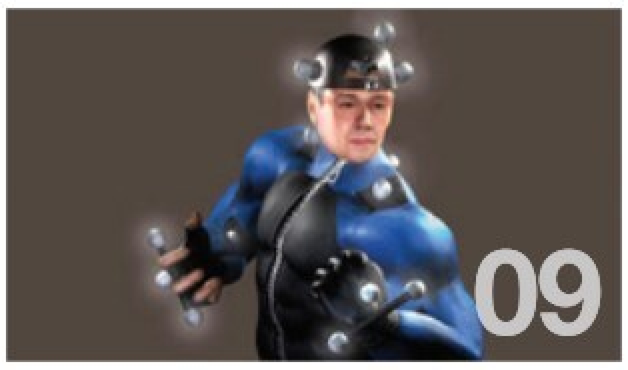
The latest Smash Bros. includes more than 70 fighters from myriad franchises. Even with that deep roster, Wii Fit Trainer's inclusion is the strangest. She holds her own, though, so I guess all that stretching paid off.



Gon

Tekken 3

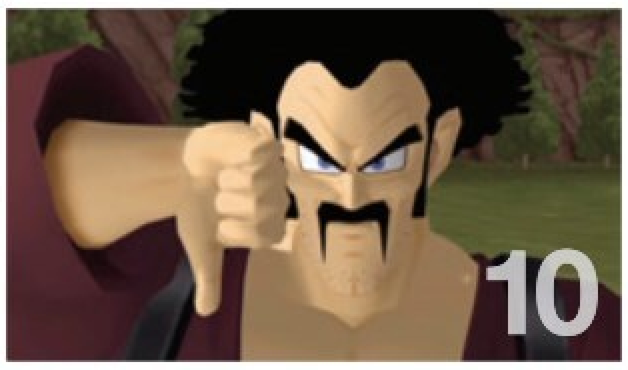
This popular Japanese character was never embraced by America, but he showed up in Tekken 3 as an unlockable fighter anyway. He's a short, but incredibly powerful fireproof dinosaur who punches his opponents with boxing gloves. He also has toxic farts.



Mokap

Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance

Originally a secret character, Mokap looks like a normal dude dressed in a motion-capture leotard covered with plastic ping-pong balls. Despite his underwhelming appearance, he can throw a fireball and use telekinesis. Surprisingly, NetherRealm made him a canonical fighter.



Mr. Satan (Hercule)

Dragon Ball Z Budokai

In the fiction of Dragon Ball, Mr. Satan is a joke, but Goku and friends let him hang around anyway. In any real fight he wouldn't stand the slightest chance, which makes his appearance in Budokai ridiculous. He has to wear a jetpack just to keep up with his flying opponents.

The Good

Vivendi's attempt at a hostile takeover of **UBISOFT** has ended. Vivendi sold off the last of the stock it had accumulated over the past few years, and the two sides have agreed to a five-year moratorium on any takeover action.

The Bad

The launch of BioWare's **ANTHEM** wasn't as smooth as Electronic Arts would have liked. Weapons bugs, complaints about weak loot drops, PS4 crashes, and more plagued the shooter out of the gate. With gamers also already feeling unsatisfied with the title's endgame content, BioWare and EA have their work cut out for it if Anthem is to have the life after launch it expects it to have.

The Ugly

THQ NORDIC held an "Ask Me Anything" (AMA) session for Darksiders III on image board 8chan, which hosts child pornography, among other disturbing content. THQ's PR and marketing director Phillip Brock and product director Reinhard Pollice answered questions in a thread filled with pornography, anti-Semitism, racism, and other unsavory topics, going along with posters' sentiments. ◆

Quotable

"If we did it, it might be a bit different! But we're definitely interested and there's definitely that possibility in the future."

Hidetaka Miyazaki, director of Dark Souls and Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, talks about the battle royale genre to The Telegraph

YOUR FIGHTING CHANCE

Rounding up the best arcade sticks for your living room

by Suriel Vazquez & Ben Reeves

1 Victrix Pro FS

The Pro FS is pricey, but you're paying for luxury. Alongside the conveniences of a modern arcade stick, such as a headset jack with volume controls and three additional programmable buttons, the Pro FS includes comfortable handles, a detachable cord, and an easily removable Sanwa Denshi ball-top joystick. These extras can be stored in the system's easily accessible bottom compartment, making it great for travel and customizing. The large, brushed steel base and rounded edges make it easy on the palms, too.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$349 | victrixpro.com

2 Hori Fighting Edge

For the price, Hori's Fighting Edge is hard to beat. Hori's textured Hayabusa buttons are more comfortable and have less give than most, making your inputs feel more responsive. The noir button layout is also more in line with how your fingers rest over the board, which means less travel time between inputs. The Edge's sturdy, brushed-steel base and clean layout give it a more refined look and feel.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$199 | stores.horiusa.com

3 Razer Panthera

Razer's premium offering puts function over form, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. All the features of a regular controller are quickly accessible near the stick, making it easy to shift into tournament lockout mode, use the analog stick or touchpad, or adjust the volume for your attached headset. ◆

AVERAGE ■■■■■■■□□□

$169 | razer.com

Media Shelf

CREED II
FROM MASHER TO MASTER: THE EDUCATED VIDEO GAME ENTHUSIAST'S FIGHTING GAME PRIMER
DAIGO "THE BEAST" UMEHARA'S FIRST BOOK!
The Will to Keep Winning
Japan's First Pro Gamer Shares His Path to Success in Gaming and Beyond
DAIGO "THE BEAST" UMEHARA

CREED II

Creed breathed new life into the Rocky franchise by introducing us to Apollo Creed's son, Adonis. For the sequel, the young boxer faces his toughest challenge yet, when his quest to become a champion reignites an old rivalry.

$19.99
creedthemovie.com

FROM MASHER TO MASTER BY PATRICK MILLER

Super Street Fighter II Turbo is one of the best fighting games of all time, and mastering its core principles can improve your overall fighting game skills. Patrick Miller literally wrote this book while becoming a Super Street Fighter II master. Even self-declared black belts can benefit from these tips.

Free
shoryuken.com

THE WILL TO KEEP WINNING BY DAIGO UMEHARA

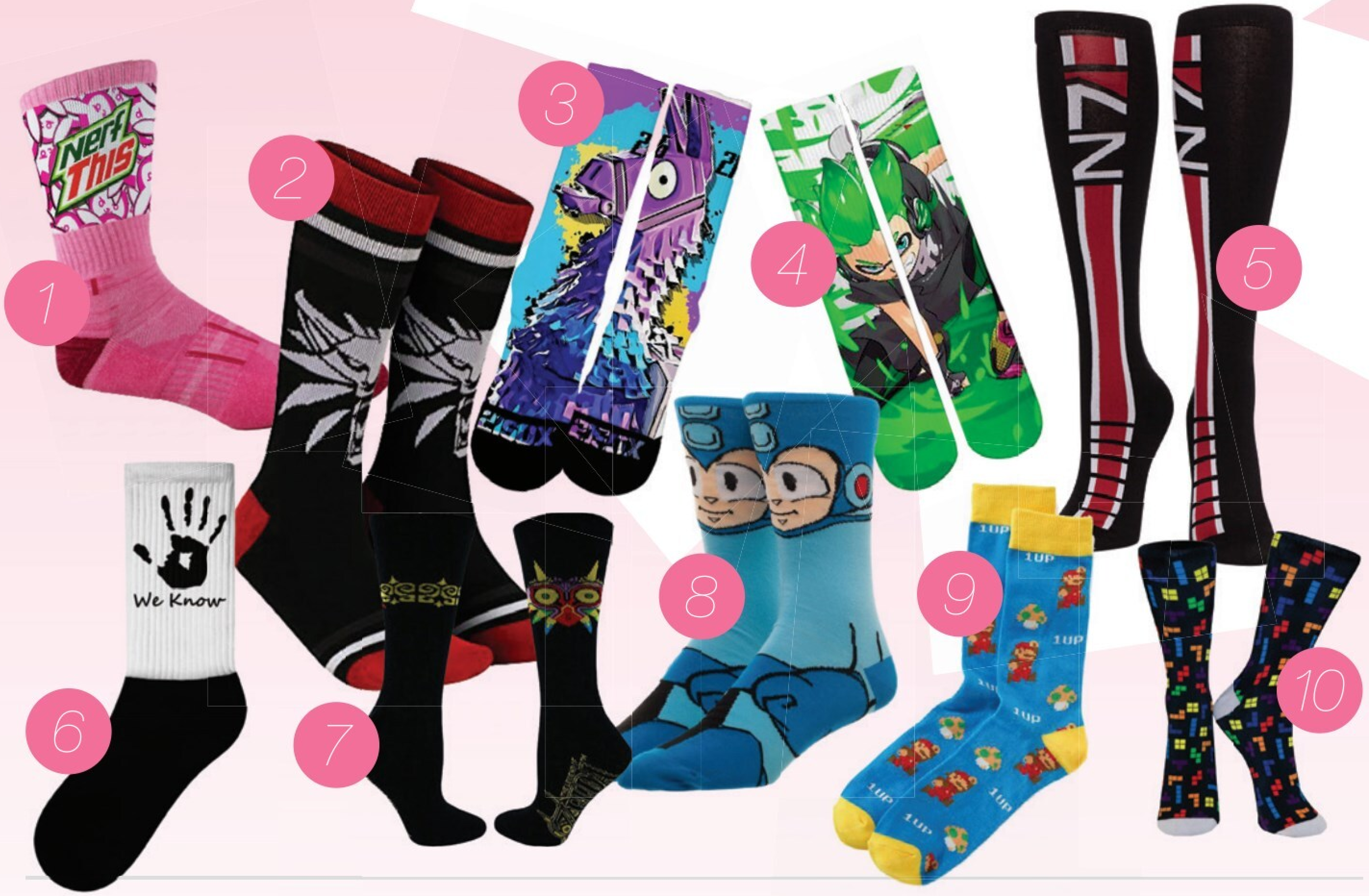
At the age of seventeen, Daigo "The Beast" Umehara became a world champion, and the pro has grown into one of the most renowned fighting game champs of all time. In his autobiography, Japan's famed expert talks about his love of games, his famous comebacks, and his obsession with excellence.

$14.99
nsurgo.com

Put A Sock In It

by Javy Gwaltney

We search for the best gaming-themed footwarmers cash can buy



1

MOXY D.Va Socks
(Overwatch)
Price: $14.50
Store: amazon.com
Why settle for building your own personal mech out of cardboard when you can also sport D.Va's infamous catchphrase on your legs?

2

White Wolf Socks
(The Witcher)
Price: $9.99
Store: witcherstore.com
Hunting monsters is a tough job. Keep your feet warm when you're tracking a Striga through the winter months.

3

Supply Llama Socks
(Fortnite)
Price: $13.00
Store: etsy.com
They say if you wear these socks while playing Fortnite between 2 and 3 AM, you'll raise your chances of finding a valuable supply llama. Actually, nobody says that, but hey, these socks are real nifty.

4

Youth Inkling Socks
(Splatoon)
Price: $11.95
Store: etsy.com
This one is for the kids who aspire to splat it up as squids.

5

N7 Knee Stripe Socks
(Mass Effect)
Price: $5.00
Store: sanshee.com
Make sure you're saving the universe in style, commander.

6

Dark Brotherhood Socks
(The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim)
Price: $25.00
Store: artshot.com
The Dark Brotherhood is watching, adventurer. Make sure to wear your best or you might end up with an arrow in the…you know the rest.

7

Majora's Mask Socks
(The Legend Of Zelda)
Price: $13.98
Store: amazon.com
A terrible fate will befall you…unless you guard yourself with these creepy socks!

8

Horrifying Blue Boy Socks
(Mega Man)
Price: $10.00
Store: thesockspot.com
GAH.

9

1UP Socks
(Super Mario Bros.)
Price: $7.99
Store: oldnavy.com
Get a life with this colorful retro tribute to everybody's favorite goomba-stomping plumber.

10

Stacking Pop Socks
(Tetris)
Price: $12.00
Store: etsy.com
With these you can slip off your shoes and share the (smelly) Tetris effect with everyone! ◆

May2019

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 07
- The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel II (PS4)

Tuesday 14
- A Plague Tale: Innocence (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Rage 2 (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ①

Friday 17
- Steven Universe: Save the Light & OK K.O.! Bundle (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

Tuesday 21
- Assassin's Creed III Remastered/Liberation Remastered (Switch)
- Team Sonic Racing (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Friday 31
- Labis x Labyrinth XL Limited Edition (PS4, Switch)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Thursday 02
- iZombie (CW)
- John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum (theaters)

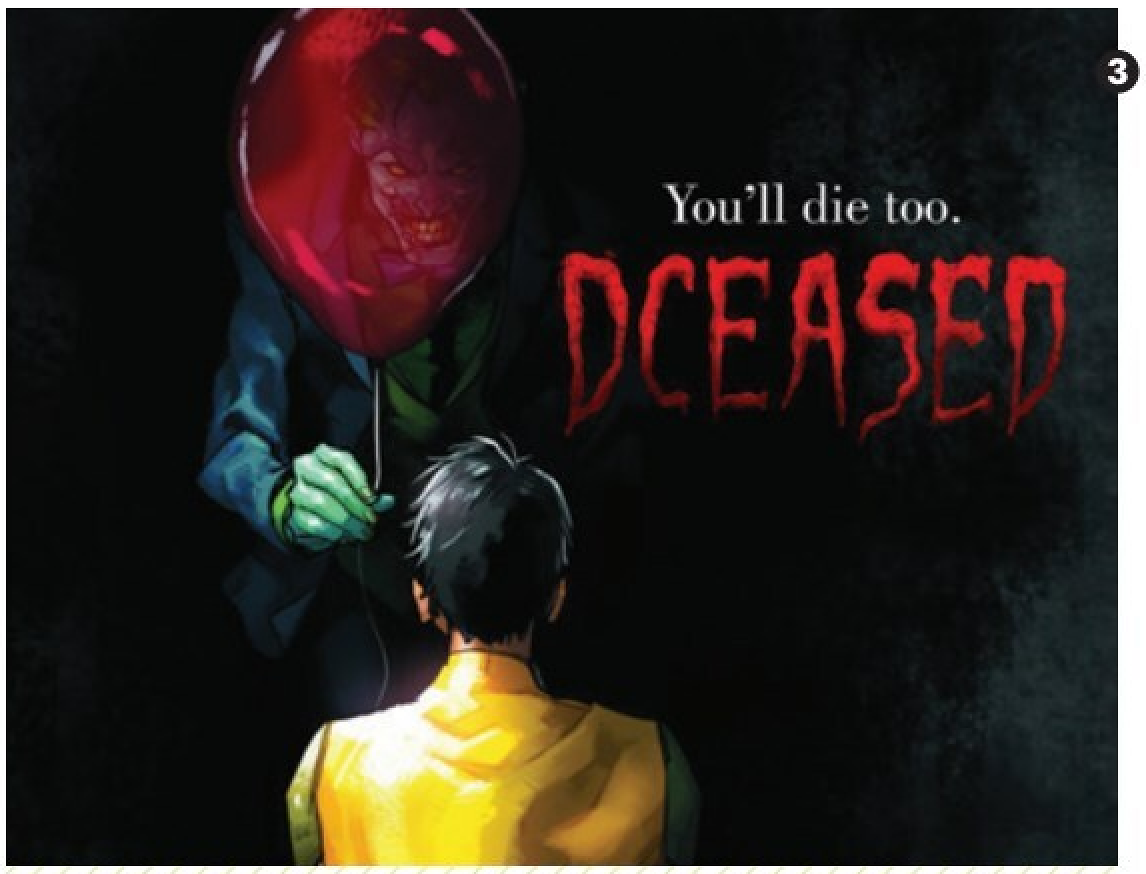
Friday 10
- Detective Pikachu (theaters)
- The Hustle (theaters)
- Ugly Dolls (theaters)

Monday 13
- L.A.'s Finest (Spectrum)

Friday 17
- Catch-22 (Hulu)

Friday 24
- Aladdin (theaters) ②
- Brightburn (theaters)

Friday 31
- Godzilla: King of the Monsters (theaters)
- Good Omens (Amazon)



GAMER CULTURE

Wednesday 01
DCeased ③
The Justice League has taken on supervillains and gods, but now faces an even greater threat: a virus that infects over 600 million people and instantly turns them into killers. DCeased is a six-issue horror story independent from the ongoing DC continuity, which means no one is safe. DCeased is written by Tom Taylor, who successfully turned the Injustice: Gods Among Us video game into a popular monthly comic book series.

Thursday 16
MegaCon Orlando
Video games, comic books, and celebrities galore will be at this year's three-day MegaCon in Orlando. The show offers workshops, costume contests, and over 400,000 square-feet of shopping. Celebrities on hand for potential autographs and photos include Michael J. Fox, Kiefer Sutherland, and Rose McIver.

Friday 24
Combo Breaker
Mortal Kombat 11, Street Fighter V, Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, and nearly 20 other fighting games will be front and center for tournaments at Combo Breaker, a three-day fighting game expo held in St. Charles, IL. If you don't want to watch the pros compete, you can put your skills on display in the 24-hour arcade.

Friday 31
Dreamhack Dallas 2019
Advertised as "the ultimate gaming lifestyle festival," Dreamhack is a three-day expo in Dallas, TX, that features a game-pitch competition, speedrunning marathons, a student showcase, and pro tournaments for Counter-Strike: Go, Rocket League, and Halo. ◆

THE FIGHTING ISSUE

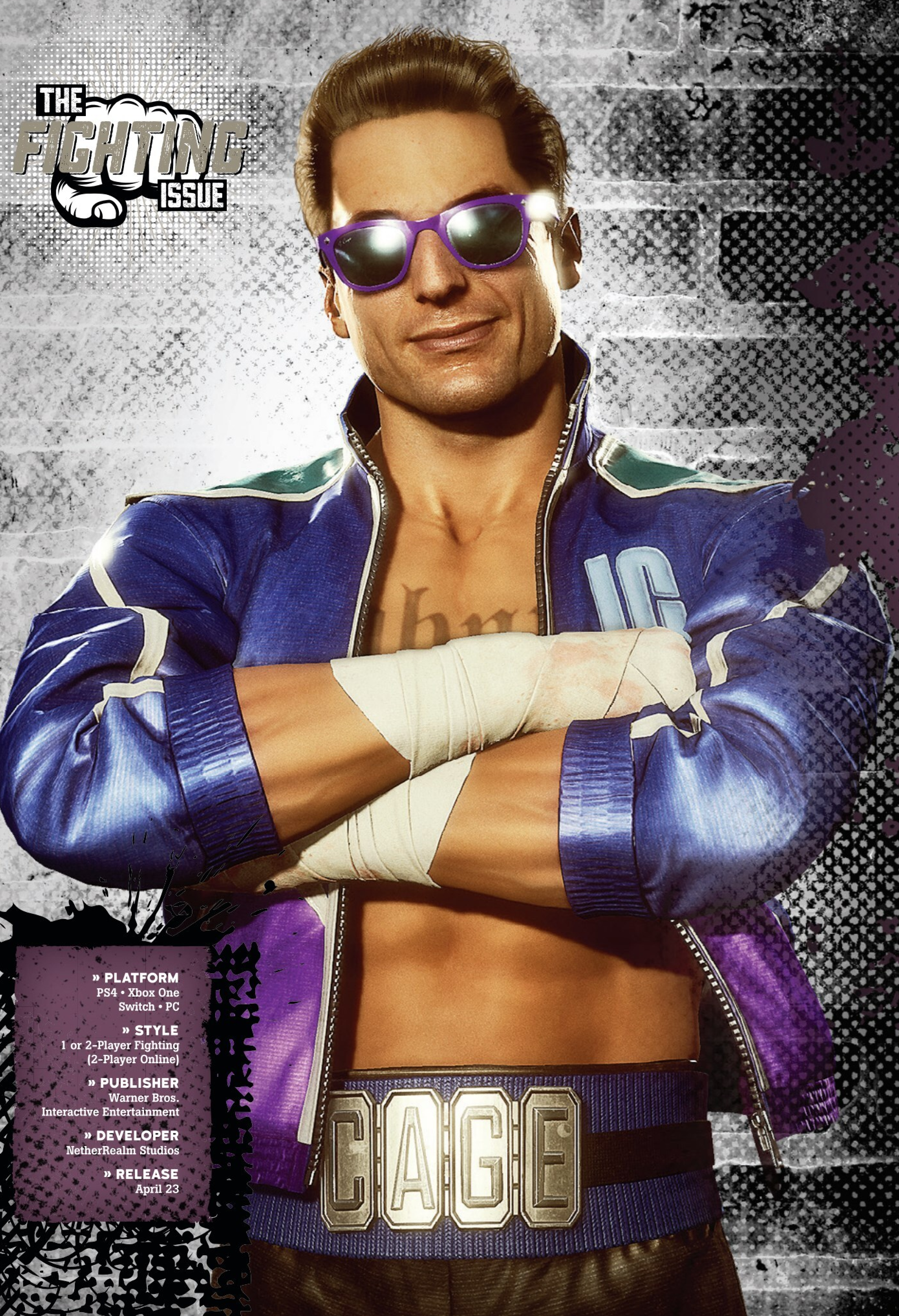
On their surface, fighting games are like a high-speed game of rock-paper-scissors. Blocking beats punching. Throwing beats blocking. Punching beats throwing. The concept is simple, but throughout its long history, the genre has proved to be so much more than that, earning its place as one of the most thrilling forms of digital competition around.

To win, you need to know when to strike, when to block, and when to move. But more importantly, you need to read the person holding the other controller; whether they're impulsive, aggressive, or timid is revealed through the tics and tells in their play, if you know how to spot them.

Fighting games are also a monument to the spirit of self-improvement and dedication. As in most sports or competitions, fighting game players often tell you the greatest opponent they've ever come across is themselves. The long hours spent learning the nuances of playing a single character like an instrument. The dozens of soul-crushing losses required to finally score that first victory. The lows can be low, but the highs are equally triumphant.

This month, we explore fighting games' past, present, and future, beginning with a deep dive into Mortal Kombat 11 on the eve of its release. Series co-creator Ed Boon walks us through the violent sequel, providing a few bits of information you haven't heard before – including a new character reveal. We then take a look at the top 30 fighting games of all time, a list that was argued with many fists raised but no punches thrown. The issue rounds out with a glimpse at the future of fighting games, including a wealth of independent projects on the cusp of release, and an exclusive look at SNK's highly anticipated Samurai Shodown.

MORTAL KOMBAT 11 PG 32
THE GREATEST FIGHTING GAMES OF ALL TIME PG 46
TEN FIGHTING GAMES ON THE HORIZON PG 58
SAMURAI SHODOWN PG 64



» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» STYLE
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(2-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
Warner Bros.
Interactive Entertainment

» DEVELOPER
NetherRealm Studios

» RELEASE
April 23

A TALE TOLD THROUGH TIME

For many fans of Mortal Kombat, it's a series of interactive movies. Ever since Mortal Kombat vs. D.C. Universe introduced NetherRealm's first major foray into cinematic storytelling, in which a film's worth of cutscenes were interspersed with one-on-one battles, the studio has remained at the forefront of creating some of the most compelling stories told in fighting games.

Many people have kept up with the series just to see how the residents of Earthrealm, Outworld, and the rest of the realms spread across the universe will fare, even if they have little intention of digging into the rest of the game itself. "They're people like me who, if I go online, I'm going to last about two minutes against most of the competition out there," says story director Dominic Cianciolo, who's been with the studio since 2007 – around the time of the switch to the more cinematic approach.

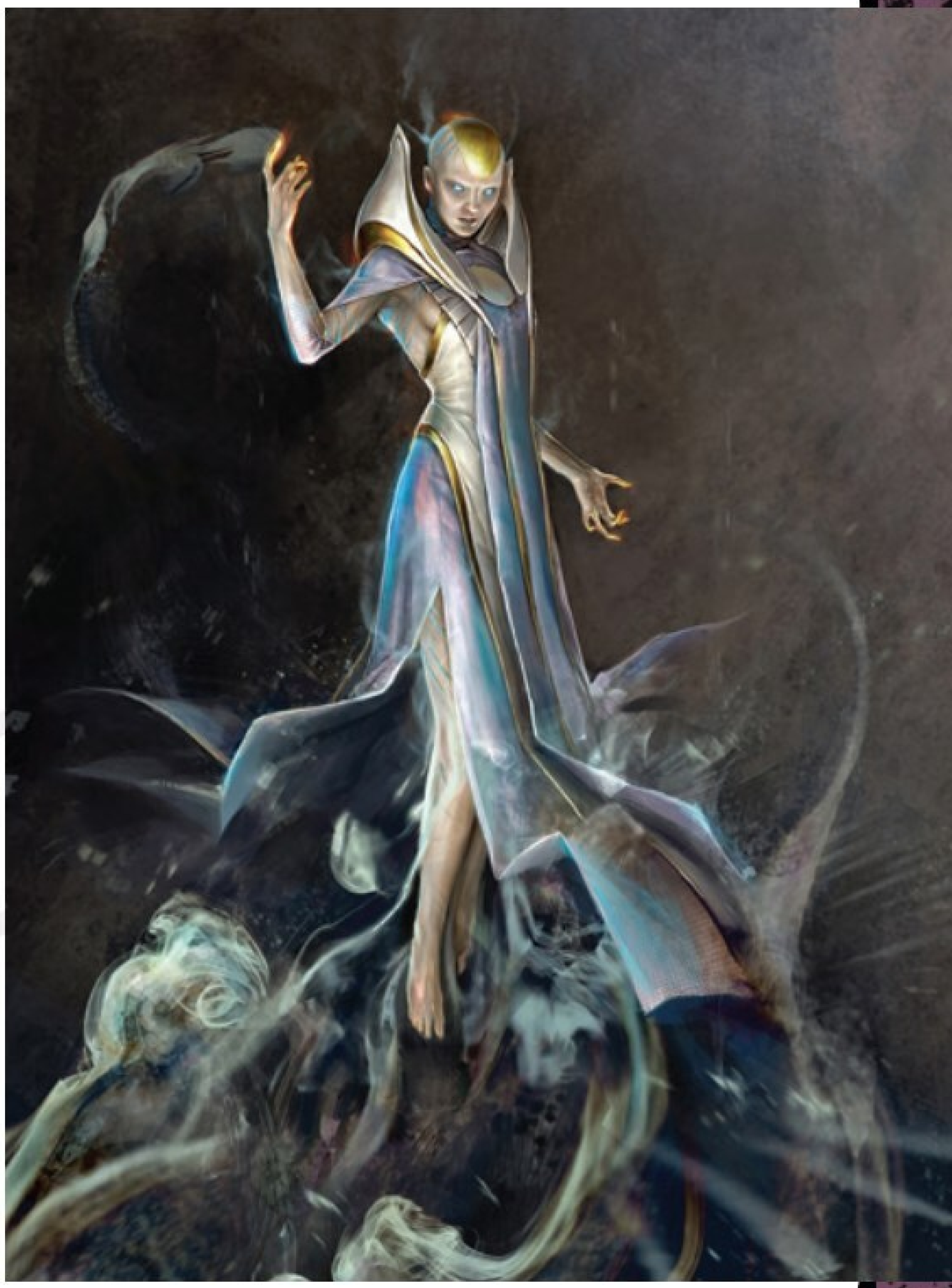
"I think a lot of people who play our story mode would normally not even purchase a fighting game," Boon says. "Seeing these characters alive in movies, there's a really cool novelty to that."

For those fans, NetherRealm strives to improve every aspect of its story modes with each game. "We've made huge strides again in our presentation, not only in the quality of the animation, but also the quality of the art there, the scope of things," Cianciolo says. The fidelity in the facial animation in Injustice 2 (the studio's other fighting series) was a huge leap forward for NetherRealm, as characters like Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman were more expressive than ever, letting writers like Cianciolo be more subtle.

"We could go for more story beats that weren't available to us before, because the facial animation couldn't support it," he says. "Even though it's only been 12 years now, it might as well be a silent film compared to the Michael Bay blockbuster."

While there doesn't look to be any major twists on the interactive side, I definitely notice how the new tech makes scenes more

Kotal Kahn can still summon the sun's rays, and can now sink his giant sword into his opponent like a hacksaw



believable as I play through the first chapter of the story mode. In an early scene, before being promoted within the special forces, Cassie must face her own mother, Sonya Blade, in physical combat. While the premise sounds weird at first, the expressions on both their faces betray their acknowledgement of the fight as more of a ritual than an actual melee. This helps sell what might otherwise be a hokey non-sequitur of a scene.

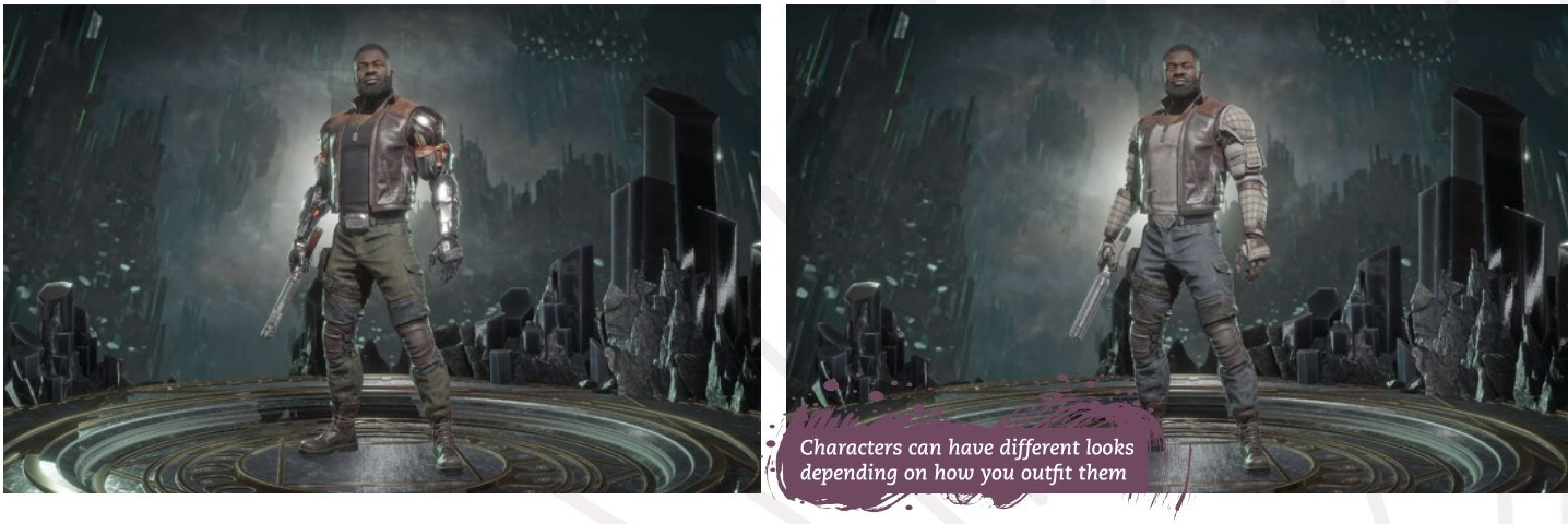
Because players must participate in these battles, NetherRealm faces some practical challenges. Their story modes have to feature whoever is on the playable roster, making them a cross-discipline endeavour. As the story team works ahead on the overarching plotline, art and other teams at the studio all have their own ideas for who would work well in the latest entry.

"We're all sort of picking at it, figuring out who's going to be in and who makes sense from a gameplay standpoint, and who makes sense from a story standpoint," Cianciolo says. "Before we get down to who the characters are going to be, it's a one-paragraph pitch of what the story is going to be. That sort of starts to flesh out where we're going in terms of the roster and that kind of thing. That's when Ed [Boon] really starts to think about it, and decides what is ultimately his vision for where we're gonna go with the game."

That pitch then turns into a 20-page treatment, fleshing out who the protagonist for every chapter is, what their goals are, and who they might fight along the way. "From there we start putting a spreadsheet together and we figure out, 'Okay, this is who this person's going to fight over the course of a chapter,'" Cianciolo says. "We're putting it all up on a board and making sure we're fighting everybody a reasonable number of times or not repeating people, that everything has weight in terms of plot, everything has weight emotionally, and then stacking that up. From there we look at the scenes, the length, and not taking the controller away from the player for too long."

For Mortal Kombat 11, the team also has the power to play around with multiple versions of the same characters. With Shinnok defeated by Cassie Cage and subsequently imprisoned by Raiden, the balance of power has shifted too heavily in the direction of the good guys. As a result, a time-bending new character named Kronika has stepped in to even out the scales, pulling fighters from other timelines (including past versions of iconic characters) to alter events as she sees fit.

This premise was one of several pitches NetherRealm considered for the game, but it won out for a few reasons. For starters, it let the studio placate both sides of its fandom; by pulling in past versions of characters, they could both continue the existing storyline (in which iconic characters like Shao Kahn and Liu Kang have either perished or become undead), while also letting fans relive their nostalgia with the "classic" renditions of fighters they grew up with. The continuity-breaking premise also feeds into one of Mortal Kombat 11's other innovations: letting fans create the best version of their favorite characters.



Characters can have different looks depending on how you outfit them

MORE SKIN IN THE GAME

In recent years, NetherRealm has let players imbue fights with a personal touch. In Mortal Kombat X, players could choose one of three variations for their character, each offering wildly different moves and strategies to tinker with. Injustice 2 featured a loot system that let players dress up their combatants however they wanted, complete with new special moves. Capitalizing on all its time-hopping, Mortal Kombat 11 takes things much further.

As you play any of the single-player or multiplayer modes in Mortal Kombat 11, you unlock a number of cosmetic skins for each character. You can choose which one you want based purely on cosmetic reasons, as this time around, how you look is divorced from how you play. "I love rarity system stuff because it gives players an extra reason to covet certain things," lead designer John Edwards says. "But we also want to make sure we're not pushing players to all look the same."

The loot system is more refined than Injustice 2's, moving away from loot boxes and duplicate items. Instead of equipping individual belts, jackets, and pants, skins have a more cohesive and tailored look. One skin for Scorpion closely resembles his look from earlier Mortal Kombat games, while another foregoes his ninja hood in favor of showing off his human features.

The motif also allows for a lot of freedom when designing different skins, giving art lead and character designer Brendan George and his crew of internal and external concept artists room to experiment with wildly different looks for each character. "I remember early on in the project, I got two characters to review on the same day," George says. "One was [for] Baraka, which was this animalistic thing. And the other one was Cassie [Cage] in a space suit. And I was like, 'This game is so f---ing cool, where else do you get to do both of those things?' But they all sort of fit in the same universe."

However, George is careful to make sure nothing too outlandish makes the cut, lest the world, characters, and lore NetherRealm has built up around them become too hard to take seriously. "It never becomes a joke of like 'Oh, this person's got a big giant head that's a smiley face,'" George says. "Because at that point no one takes what you're doing seriously, and there are serious moments in the game; there is serious drama to some of the story, but there's also the fun there."

To further customize your characters, you can alter their match introductions, victory poses, taunts, and even Brutalities. "One of the big things about Mortal Kombat is we have always tried to incorporate a lot of secrets or rewards, things for players to earn and unlock as they play," Edwards says. "It's more than just a fighting game; we want to make sure that there's a very robust single-player experience as well. Part of that is to have cool things the player can get, they can use, they can modify, and extend the life of the game." These bits of flair drop randomly, but also based on the activity you're playing, with a rarity from "mortal" to "elder," depending on the difficulty of the task you had to complete.

GETTING INTO GEAR

Along with skins, each character has three customizable pieces of gear you can alter. For example, you can swap out Scorpion's iconic spear, his mask, or the swords he wields, letting you further individualize "your" version of him.

While gear is another way you can play dress-up with your favorite character, there's also a bit of strategy to it, as you can equip them with augments. Augments provide small bonuses, similar to how gear worked in Injustice 2. Split across five types, augments can increase the damage of certain moves, imbue you with passive buffs, or increase the amount of experience you gain from performing fatalities or beating a Tower of Time. Augments have their biggest impact in single-player, where they help offset some of the stiff challenges in certain modes. Some augments are tailored to counter specific kinds of challenges, which makes swapping these bonuses in and out key to survival.

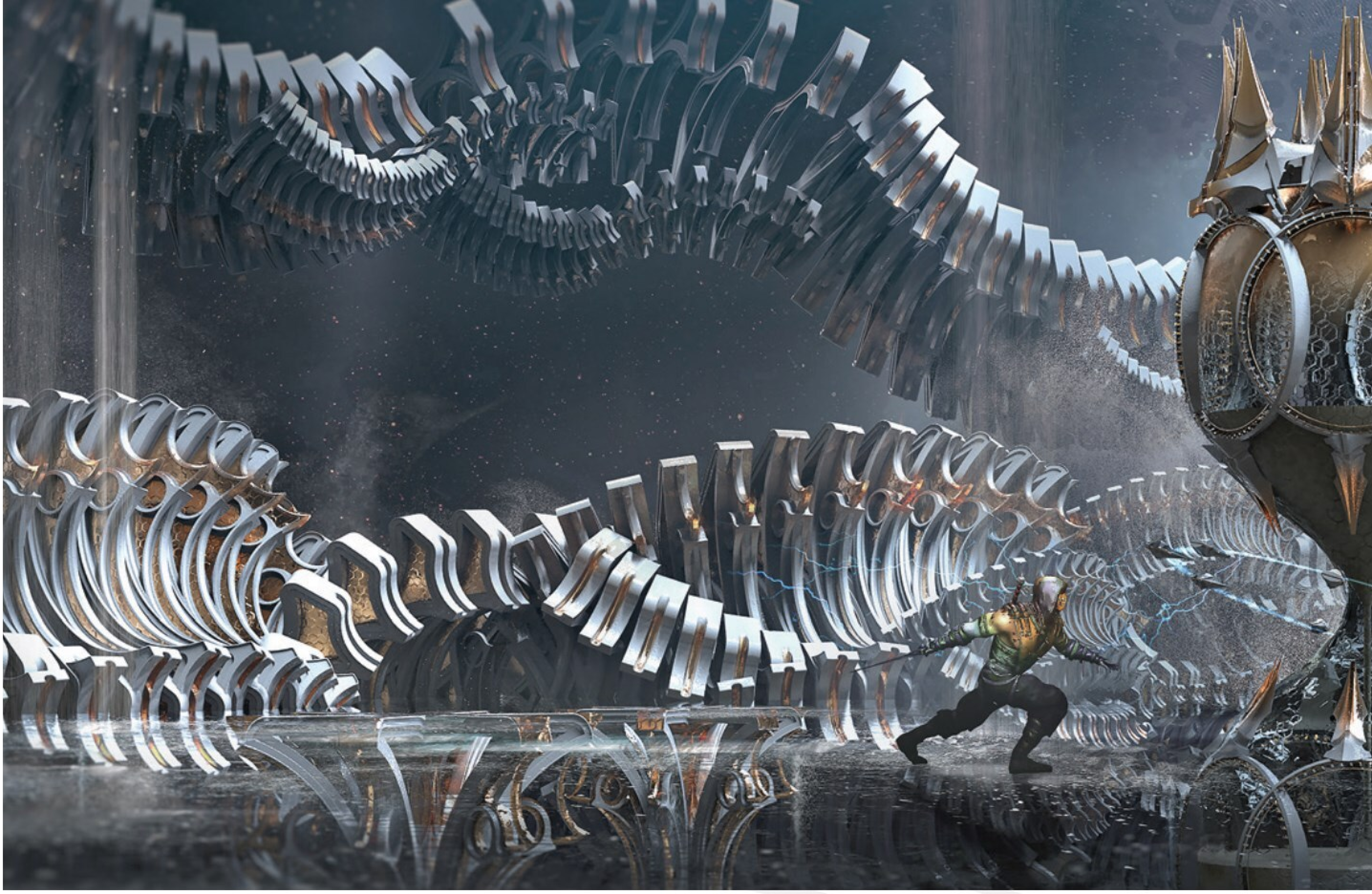
However, to make sure things don't get too out of hand, many augments are mode-specific, and may only apply to the Towers of Time or A.I. Battle (another returning mode from Injustice 2). Augments create something of a feedback loop as well, since they drop more often from their respective modes.

When it comes to multiplayer, being able to amass gear over time means dedicated players have more options than players who don't play as often. But Edwards says those late to the party won't be left out entirely; either augments won't affect gameplay, or players can opt into enabling them. "If you want to play the crazy Pokémon mode, where I'm going to take my overpowered guy in or whatever, that's cool, as long as the person you're playing against wants to do that too."

While some augments work for casual PvP matches, the ones that apply to ranked play won't affect how you fight, and are limited to things like earning additional experience for going on win streaks. "Something we learned was everybody wants to look cool, so we wanted to make sure when you're playing PvP online, you're at least able to look the way you want to," Edwards says. "We're always wanting to make sure that just the pure ranked online fighting game stays as close to fair as humanly possible. So we made an effort this time to split the gameplay aspect out of the gear."

When you first get a particular piece of gear, it drops without any slots for augments. As you play with that piece of gear equipped, it gains experience and levels up, unlocking sockets you can fill with different augments. These sockets won't be generic, so you can only equip augments of a particular type into them.

Between skins, flair, gear, and augments across each of the 25 base characters, George says the customization options number in the "multi-thousands." Tinkering with just a small subset of what will be in the final game, I can see the scale of what NetherRealm is going for. There are plenty of unique looks, each with different color schemes that give my Scorpion his own personality, but still make him look distinctly like Scorpion. And depending on the color scheme you choose, certain pieces of gear change to match. Along with all the other pieces of flair I could choose from, this meant I could spend hours building my perfect Scorpion, one my defeated opponents will remember for his demonic mask, white trim, and fire-spinning win pose.



KUSTOMIZING KOMBOS

Players can also customize each character's special moves through what NetherRealm is calling "custom variations," one of Mortal Kombat 11's biggest innovations.

In most fighting games, characters have a static toolset, and figuring out how to properly use it is a fundamental pillar of learning to play. Over the course of months and years, players can predict what their opponents might do in a given match simply because they're familiar not only with their own move set, but that of their opponent. Custom variations throw a wrench into this plan, which provides an interesting set of challenges for NetherRealm.

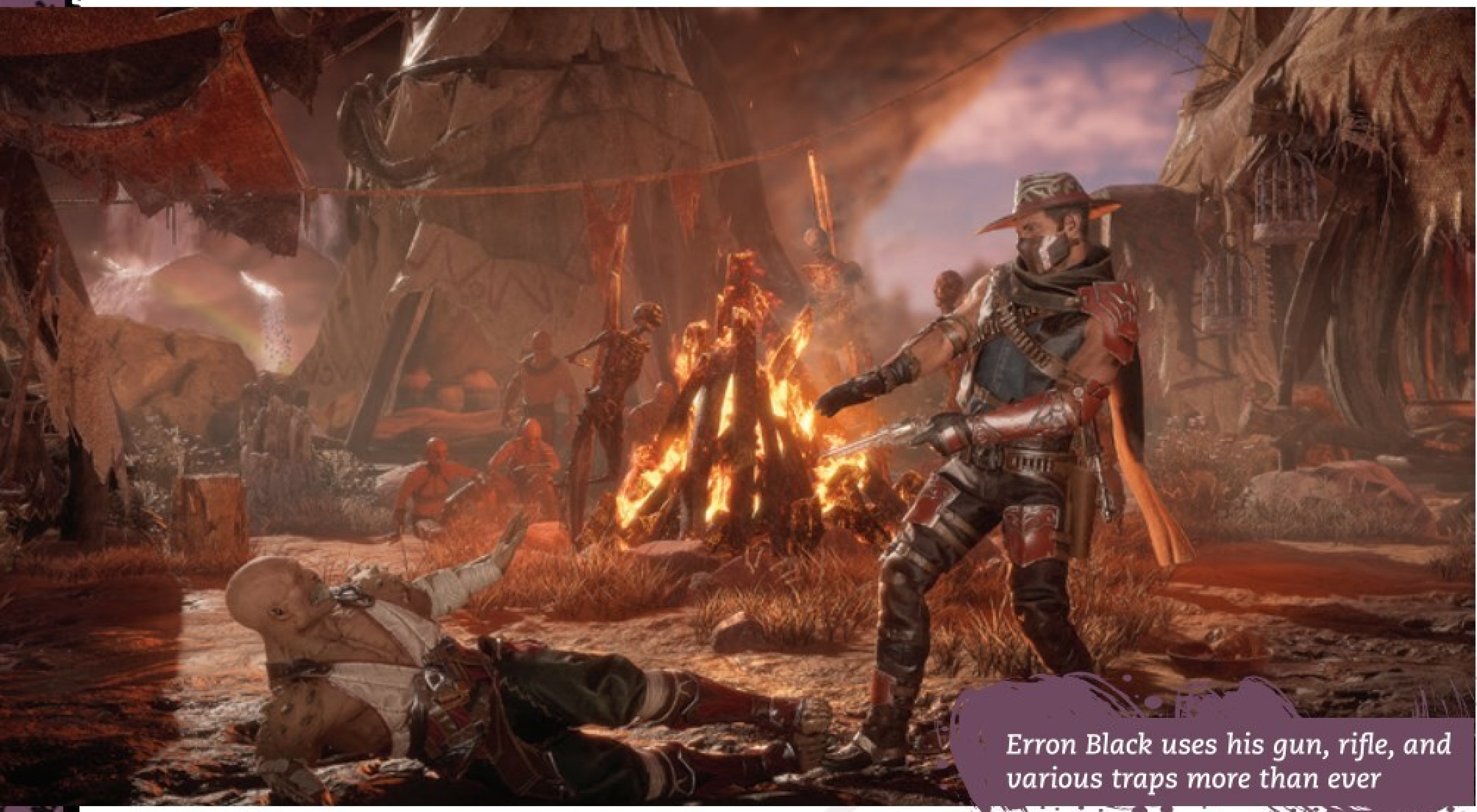
Each character in Mortal Kombat has a baseline set of moves; Scorpion's iconic spear and teleport moves are included in his arsenal no matter what. On top of that, each character has three slots for additional moves and options (up to 10 per character) that can, depending on how they're combined, push that character to play a little differently. (For a short primer on Cetrion, check our sidebar on page 40).

This makes it easier to fall in love with not just a character's look, personality, and backstory, but their playstyle as well. With custom variations, Scorpion can be made into an offensive powerhouse with an arsenal of sword-based attacks, lean into long-range keep-away tactics with a fireball, or play tricks with a more maneuverable teleport.

This doesn't mean every character can be molded to every playstyle. Edwards doesn't want to dilute the overall playfield so much that every character feels the same, so some characters simply won't be able to play certain ways. Luckily, individual moves make it hard for characters not to stand out from each other. "Scorpion's spear is a very unique thing," Edwards says. "No other character has something like that. Even though it is a long-range capture move, and Sub-Zero has the ice ball, they're kind of the same, conceptually, but I don't think anyone would pick [the game] up and say 'Oh, these two things are exactly the same.'"

In the matches I played, the moves my opponent and I had equipped could drastically change how fights played out. If my opponent's Skarlet had a teleport, I had to be more wary of throwing projectiles, lest she sneak up behind me and counterattack. This variety gives characters depth without giving them an overwhelming number of inputs for players to remember. Because I didn't know what tools my opponent entered the match with, it could be hard to learn their gameplan. I'm still not entirely sure whether variations will make matches too hectic to deal with or make for more interesting matches long-term, but it's a unique take on fighting games, and I appreciate that NetherRealm is experimenting with all kinds of crazy new abilities.

With this many options available to every character, making sure every fight is fair is a



Erron Black uses his gun, rifle, and various traps more than ever

Noob Saibot looks more distinct than ever, and uses his clone along with a new sickle weapon

daunting task. One way to curb the power of certain moves is to have them take up two move slots instead of one, though this hopefully won't be too common. "We try to make as many moves as possible to be one slot, and then it's just the moves that are just obviously stronger than others that are the ones that become two slots," says lead designer Paulo Garcia.

To that end, NetherRealm is currently planning to rein in customization when it comes to serious competition. In single-player, offline versus, and casual online matches, players are free to mix up any moves they wish. But in online ranked matches and tournament play, Garcia and the balance team have decided to create a number of preset variations for each character, similar to Mortal Kombat X's variations. "As much as we can, we want to make sure that all the custom moves are included in those tournament variations," he says.

The plan is to have a minimum of two variations per character at launch, then work from there. Depending on player feedback and their own internal testing, they may then balance these presets against each other by swapping moves in and out or adding more variations, along with the usual tweaking of individual moves. Ideally, every move available to a character will see competitive play, but won't be part of an overwhelming number of permutations that could make tournaments chaotic.

When it comes to long-term support, NetherRealm has committed to providing additional skins and gear to the game post-launch, but Edwards tells me more moves would be the hardest thing to add after the game releases, as they require a large amount of work from both an aesthetic and mechanical perspective. "You drop in a new special or something like that, then it's like, 'Well, that special has to work with all specials, not just of that character; it has to work now against all of the other characters' stuff," Edwards says. "So it does present unique challenges."

Edwards isn't ruling out the possibility, though. "As long as the game is doing well, and people are playing, we want to support it," he says. "And [extra moves do] sound like one of the things that would naturally, maybe, kind of flow out of that as we add DLC characters and we patch and things like that… whatever players seem to gravitate to and want, that's the kind of stuff we'll look into."

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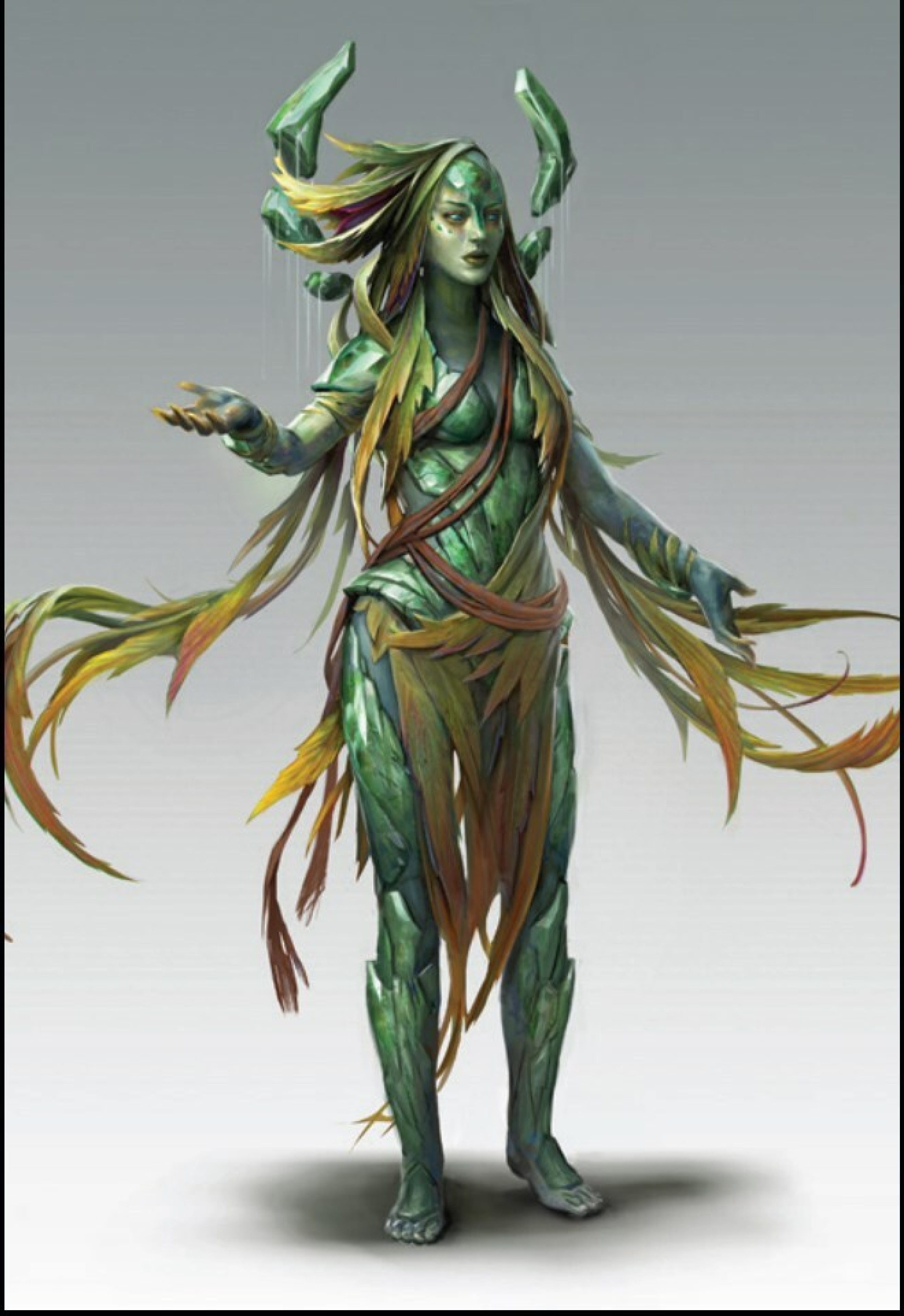
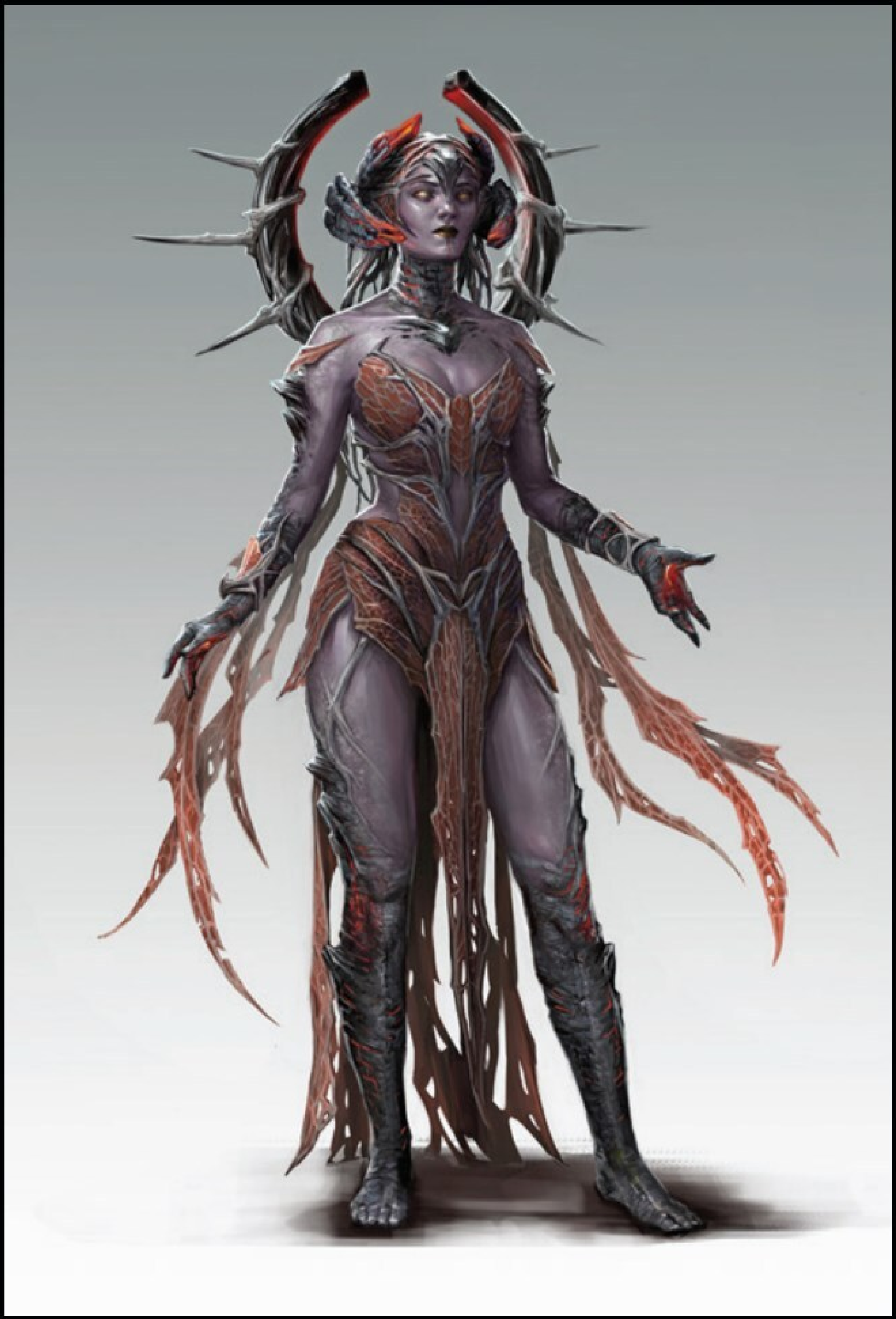




CETRION, THE ELDER GOD

While Mortal Kombat 11 isn't introducing too many new characters, Cetrion stands out as one of the few playable Elder Gods in the series. As Kronika's child and the polar opposite of her sibling Shinnok, Cetrion can bend the elements of earth, wind, fire, and water to her will. Even her most basic moves display godlike power. Her sweep makes a geyser of lava erupt from the ground, while a basic attack string causes her to transform into water before delivering a spinning divekick.

On the battlefield, she prefers to fight from a distance, as many of her moves are meant to keep her opponents away rather than punish them up close. She can lob boulders both high and low (with a Krushing Blow caused by having an opponent jump right into one), summon a diagonal jet of fire that, when amplified, sweeps the ground near it as well, and catch opponents off-guard with a low-hitting vine attack that sets them up for a combo when amplified. Finally, she can summon a wall of stone that absorbs and reflects fireballs.

With custom variations, Cetrion can layer on a low-hitting ground pound or teleport around the battlefield as water. She can also employ two magical fields; one, a ring of fire, deals damage over time to enemies standing inside of it, which synergizes well with her ability to keep opponents locked in place. The other, a field of vapor, allows her to block attack strings even after the first hit lands, preventing opponents from finishing combos.

Cetrion doesn't have many intricate combos of her own, which makes her a good pick for new players who'd rather fight from afar. However, they'll have to play smart to win; her many projectiles take time to manifest, which means players must to use them wisely to keep foes at bay.

(continued from 39)

TIPPING THE SCALES

Custom variations are only one way Mortal Kombat 11 is changing up its bloody fights. Boon believes one of the reasons Mortal Kombat has endured for so long as a series is it isn't afraid to make major changes, keeping players on their toes and each entry feeling fresh. "Every game we do, we're going to introduce something new, and it's not just going to be a prettier version of the last game, which was a prettier version of the game before that," he says.

As one of the people making the subtle tweaks many casual players may not notice, but tend to have major ramifications for veteran players, Garcia is cognizant of the challenge of making sure classic characters "feel" the same, even when they've undergone major changes. "Outside of the moves that characters have, like Scorpion has his spear and Sub-Zero has his ice ball, we try to make it so that Scorpion and Sub-Zero feel very different every game," Garcia says. The games themselves also tend to abide by very different philosophies, which helps keep the series interesting in the long run.

The general philosophy behind Mortal Kombat 11, Garcia tells me, is to slow down the pace of matches so players can make more informed guesses and decisions. "In Mortal Kombat X, we wanted a very offensively driven, get-in-the-opponent's-face-heavy game," he says. In that game, landing a hit meant players could use their character's abilities and game plan to quickly smother an opponent, rather than wait and see what they do next. "The characters themselves still have crazy moves and things they do, but in general, we're making it where the outcome of those [moves are] a little bit smaller in scope," Garcia says.

To that end, the run mechanic from Mortal Kombat X that allowed for such overwhelming offensives is gone, giving the defending player more room to breathe. To counteract these changes, walking is a much more viable way to get around. Similarly, characters don't have as many elaborate options for confusing their opponent into blocking incorrectly. "[In Mortal Kombat X], some characters had both great high and low mix-ups," says QA analyst and former Mortal Kombat professional player Steve Brownback. In Mortal Kombat 11, Brownback tells me, the risk-reward on mix-ups is amplified in that more attack strings transition into combos, but leave players more vulnerable if they don't connect. Characters also have fewer confusing attack strings overall, which makes responding to offense a little easier.

Characters also have more options than they've had before. Many classic characters have longer-range attacks as a result of the weapons they're carrying. While Scorpion has long wielded a sword, he now implements it into his actual move set more often, giving him the option to approach from further away. Meanwhile, individual meters for super moves, amplifying special moves, and defensive options like wake-up attacks and combo-ending breakaways let players use all of these options without making them mutually exclusive. And because each meter fills up automatically (with different moves causing the meter to fill back up at different rates) you can play defensively until you have more options at your disposal.

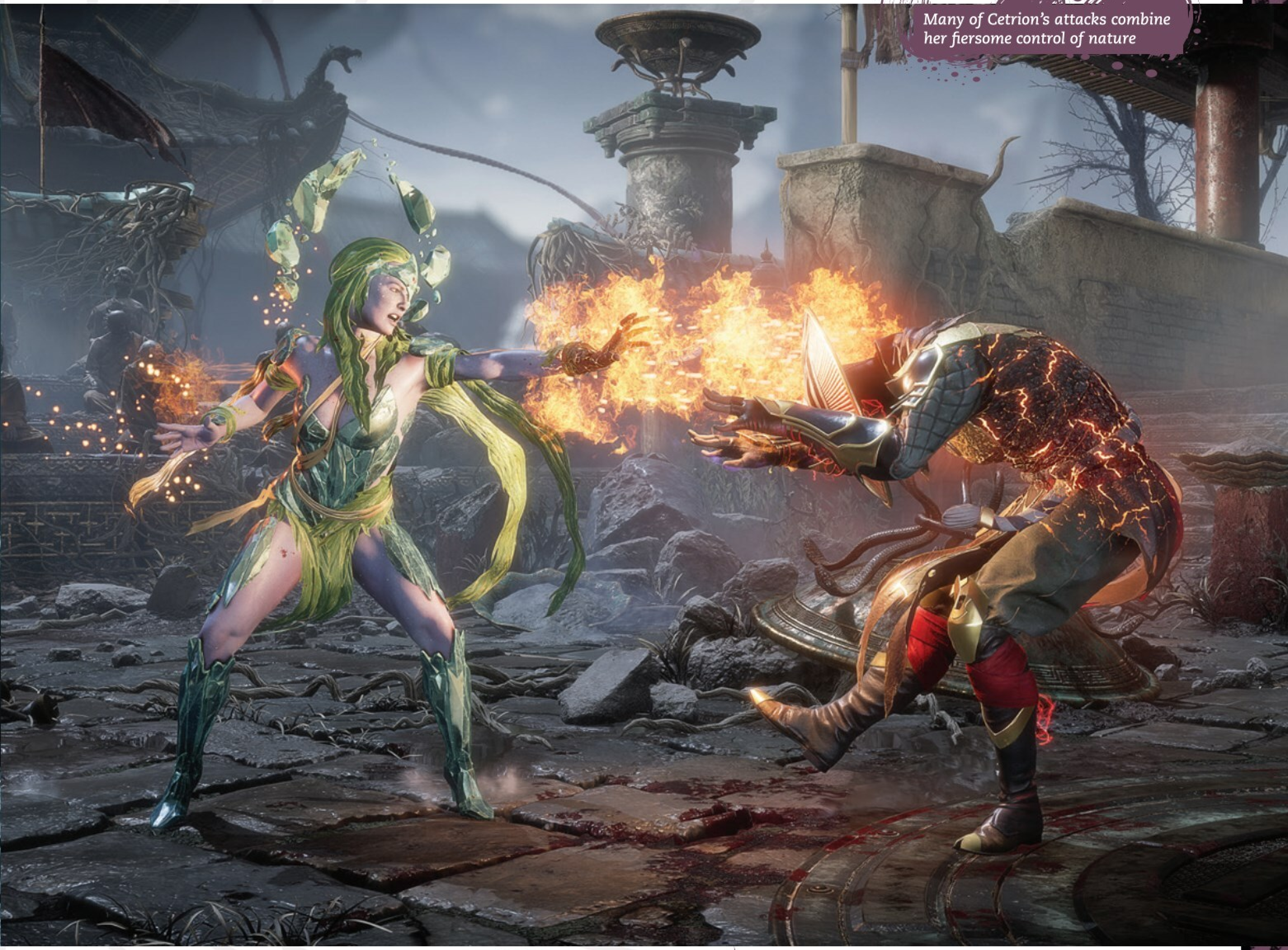
According to Garcia, combos are also shorter across the board, but do about the same damage they did before. This reinforces Mortal Kombat 11's philosophy of allowing players to make more decisions, but in a different way. "We just wanted to make sure that it doesn't really turn into, you make a mistake and now you don't get to do anything for 10 seconds," Garcia says. "We wanted to keep that time as short as possible while still allowing the other [player] to have fun."

Another way Mortal Kombat 11 puts more decisions in players' hands is with Krushing Blows. Originally, Krushing Blows were only meant to give certain attacks more impact (the camera zooms in to highlight a punch or kick as it breaks an opponent's bones). However, once the balance team got a look at them, they thought the violent flourishes would be a great way to sprinkle in some of the visceral moments from X-Rays, the super moves from previous games.

Moves with a Krushing Blow property will, under certain conditions like landing three times in a round, deal significantly more damage and gain extra perks like allowing for longer combos. The Krushing Blow version of a move can only be used once per match, which means players have to think carefully about how to implement and avoid them, adding another layer to fights.

"The other cool thing is that because they all have their requirements, when someone sees [a Krushing Blow], not only do they see how cool it was, they also know it means that player did whatever the requirement was, so it makes it seem even cooler, knowing they had to set it up," Edwards adds.

These changes make for consistently exciting fights. Because of the shorter combos, I was more quickly and frequently put in a position where I had to predict what my opponent might do based on what I'd gleaned of their playstyle. The lack of running puts more emphasis on moving in and out of your opponent's attack ranges and knowing when you can properly punish their mistakes. And because of the reduced importance of combos, less flashy options like tripping

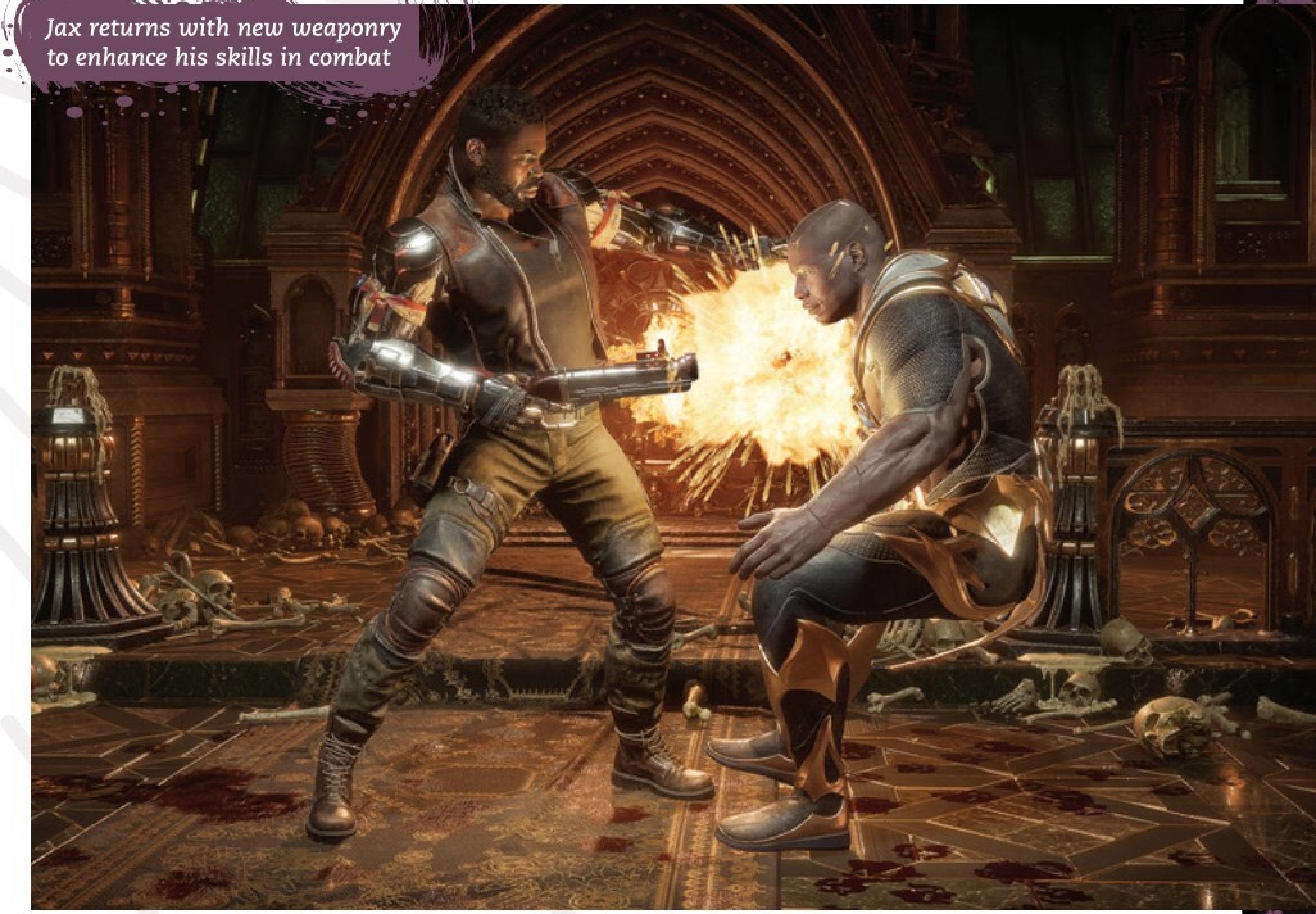


Many of Cetrion's attacks combine her fiersome control of nature

an opponent who refuses to block low or walking up and throwing an opponent who refuses to stop blocking altogether feel more viable and satisfying by comparison.

Krushing Blows added some fun surprises to my matches, like a well-timed uppercut that suddenly transitioned to the close-up shot, dealing more damage and closing out a round. But the more I played, the more I internalized how to activate Krushing Blows and began to implement them into my play rather than wait for them to come out at random. The result was matches that felt fun and strategic, even without knowing every single move at my disposal.

These changes also complement NetherRealm's desire to make fights more enjoyable for everyone. "We generally try to always focus on the general players first, and the top players will sort of take care of themselves," Garcia says. "The general direction is to make the game so that as many people can play it, and then work from there. And then the players that are very skillful and tournament players, they care more about the functionality and balance of power in the moves."



Jax returns with new weaponry to enhance his skills in combat

NEW BLOOD

Boon and the rest of NetherRealm have slowly built one of the most inviting fighting-game series around, and Mortal Kombat looks to continue that tradition. The feeling isn't new in the latest entry, but it's striking how much time you can spend in Mortal Kombat 11 outside of fights, even as everything you do – managing your consumables and planning out strategies for towers, scouring the Krypt for secrets, and decking out your fighter – is all in service of what has kept the series going: Facing off in spectacular, one-on-one bouts with larger-than-life characters.

"People love fighting games, and so we always do whatever we can to give them different things to do within the fighting game besides just going and fighting another person," Kirtzic says. "Not everybody is great at fighting games, but they want to watch fighting games, they want to still be in fighting games."

It doesn't take that central conceit for granted, either. From what I've played, fights feel as tactical as they are violent, and the changes give them enough novelty to make their nuances worth digging into without losing Mortal Kombat's signature style. With plenty of ways to express myself before I've even entered a match, a strong offering of single-player content, and a more elaborate and fun story mode, Mortal Kombat 11 should continue NetherRealm's streak of giving its many divergent fans what they want – as long as they're not afraid to get some blood on their hands. ◆

For a deeper dive on Cetrion, interviews with the developers, and more, check out gameinformer.com/mortalkombat

THE GREATEST FIGHTING GAMES OF ALL TIME

Across the next several pages, you'll find a celebration of the best fighting games of all time. Our picks include classics that have stood the test of time as well as recent juggernauts that have earned their place among the elite. We've weighted our list towards gameplay and lasting impact more than anything else, putting feature lists and single-player content on the backburner. We've included competitors from several different disciplines, but all of them capture that wonderful mix of dedication, competition, and all-out fun that have made the genre so invigorating for decades.

For this list, we focused mostly on traditional fighting, which means you won't find wrestling, boxing, mixed martial arts, or any games that are based on real-world sports. With that out of the way, let's get to the fight.

BY GAME INFORMER STAFF

30 // INJUSTICE 2

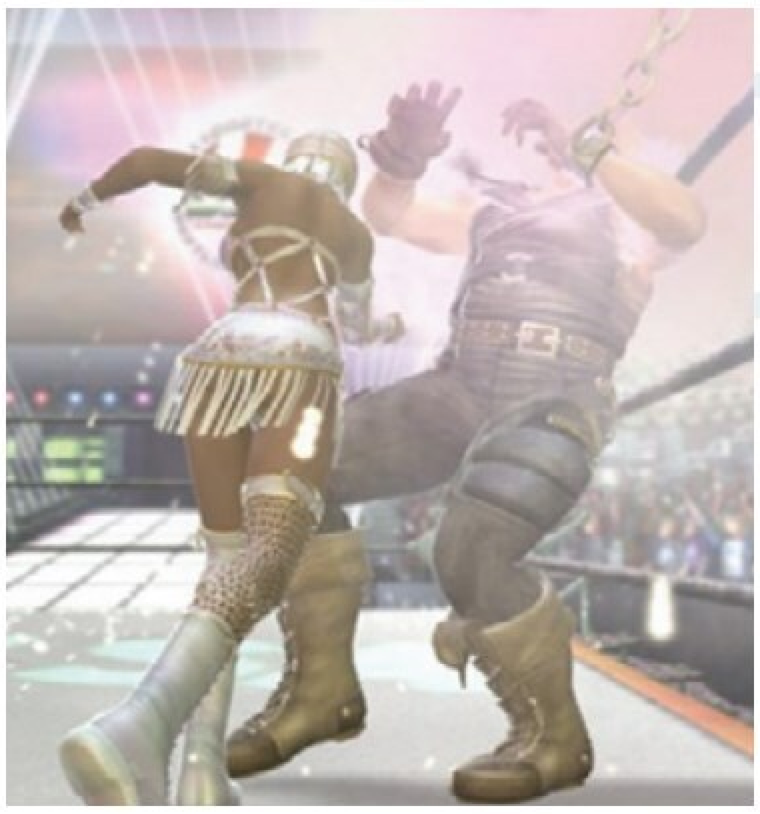
PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • PC • Android • iOS
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: NetherRealm Studios
RELEASE: 2017

You might not think NetherRealm's ultra-violent sensibilities would mix well with DC Comics' all-ages brands, but the studio behind Mortal Kombat knocked it out of the park with the Injustice series. NetherRealm's gory finishers morphed into over-the-top superhero slapstick in Injustice 2, but the tone works surprisingly well. While the single-player story wasn't as strong as the first game, NetherRealm's combat was more polished, earning Injustice 2 a devoted following on the competitive circuit. Even after hours of knockout superhero brawls, we still giggle with glee when The Flash travels through time to smash Superman's head against a *T. rex*.

29 // PERSONA 4 ARENA ULTIMAX

PLATFORM: PS3 • 360
PUBLISHER: Atlus **DEVELOPER:** Arc System Works, Atlus
RELEASE: 2014

Appealing to two different audiences is no easy feat, but Atlus managed to please Persona fans and fighting game enthusiasts with Persona 4 Arena. As a sequel, Ultimax continued the RPG-influenced story and refined the original fighting concepts, resulting in a fascinating fusion. It provided new characters based on a variety of novel gameplay mechanics, and it didn't skimp on the cutscenes. It sat in an odd middle ground between genres, but Ultimax had something for every kind of fan.



28 // DEAD OR ALIVE 4

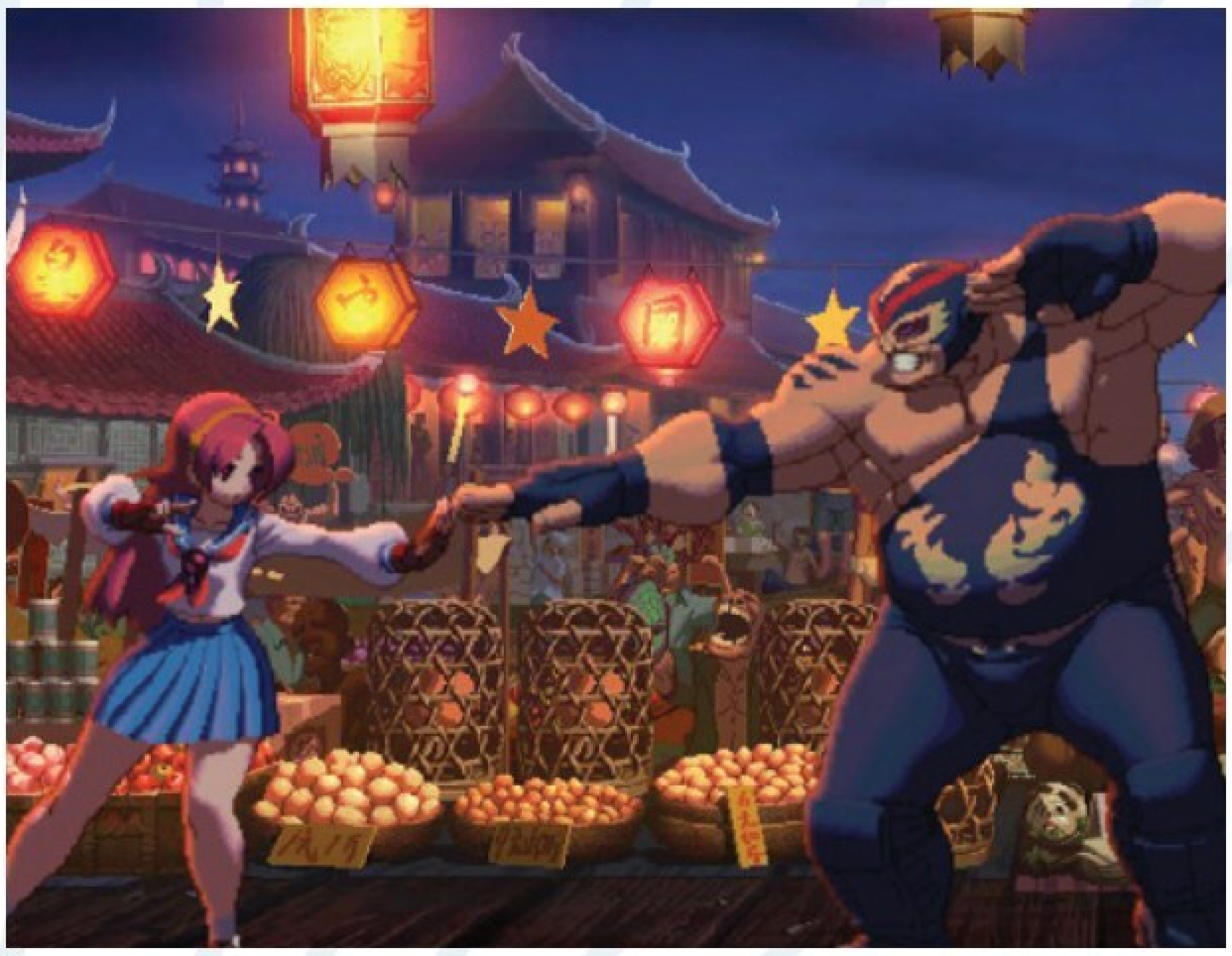
PLATFORM: 360
PUBLISHER: Tecmo
DEVELOPER: Team Ninja
RELEASE: 2005

In the early months of the Xbox 360's lifespan, the console was desperate for quality games to show off what the new generation could pull off, and Dead or Alive 4 fit the bill perfectly. One of Dead or Alive's most mechanically sound entries, the fourth entry featured an in-depth counter system and an impressive level of fluidity in animation. It was also the first in the series to feature online play (a novelty in 2005).

27 // BLAZBLUE: CENTRAL FICTION

PLATFORM: PS4 • Switch • PS3 • PC
PUBLISHER: Aksys Games **DEVELOPER:** Arc System Works
RELEASE: 2016

The stories in fighting games are frequently viewed as inconsequential, but the complicated tale in BlazBlue is a big part of its appeal. Central Fiction served as the satisfying conclusion to a long-running arc, but it also delivered on the combat front with 35 playable characters competing in matches that encouraged offensive play. The highly technical bouts reveled in their complexity, making Central Fiction a rewarding entry for seasoned players.



26 // THE KING OF FIGHTERS XIII

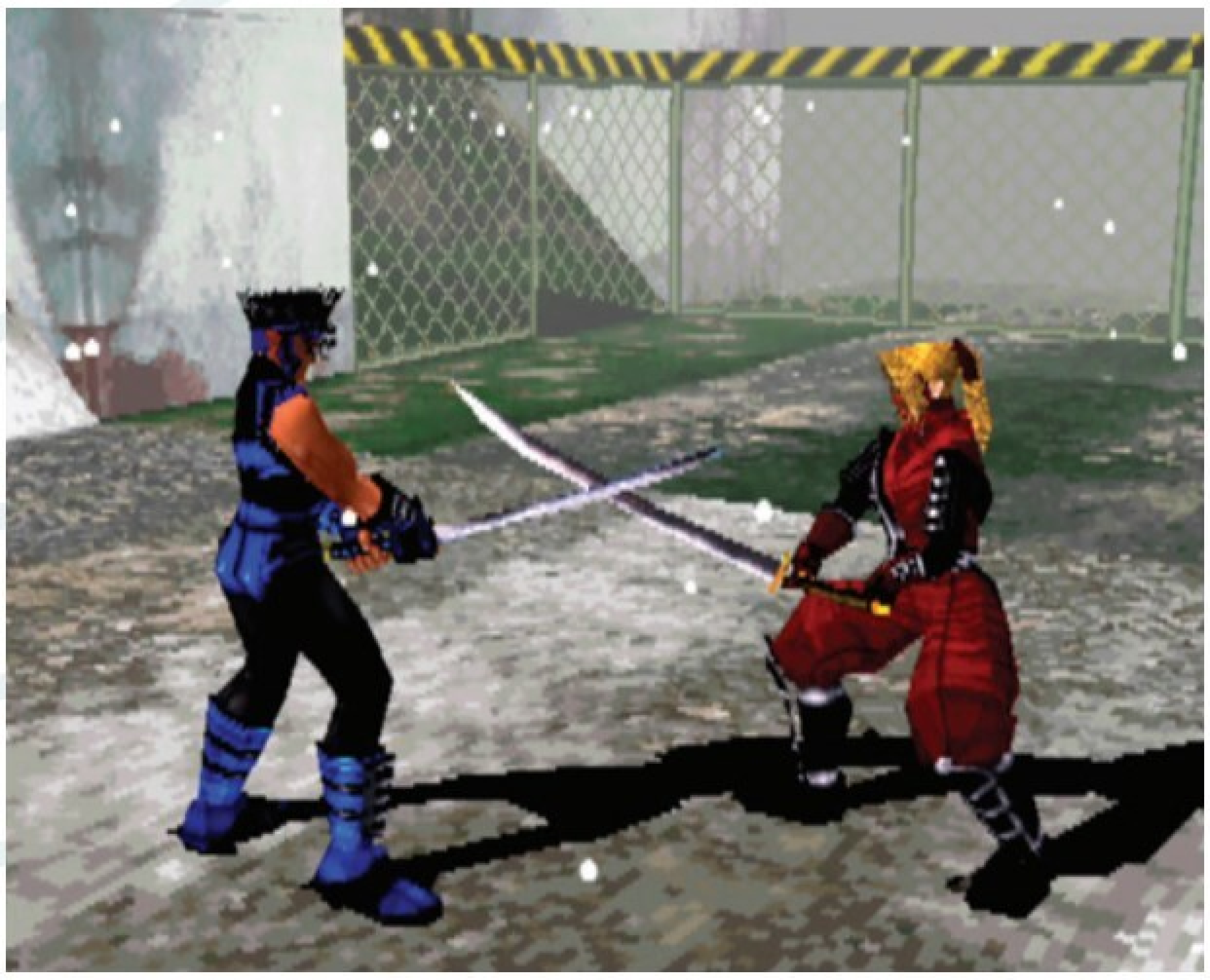
PLATFORM: PS3 • 360 • PC • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Atlus **DEVELOPER:** SNK
RELEASE: 2011

As most fighting-game series were switching to 3D models and simplifying inputs, the King of Fighters series stuck to its retro guns, and for hardcore fans, the results spoke for themselves in XIII. A deluge of chained supers and drive cancels mixed with the series' staples of multiple jump types and three-man teams to deliver one of the most complex, old-school fighters around. The gorgeous 2D sprites and backgrounds, meanwhile, have aged better than most of their polygonal contemporaries, giving King of Fighters XIII a character unlike anything else out there today.

25 // BUSHIDO BLADE

PLATFORM: PS1
PUBLISHER: Square **DEVELOPER:** Light Weight
RELEASE: 1997

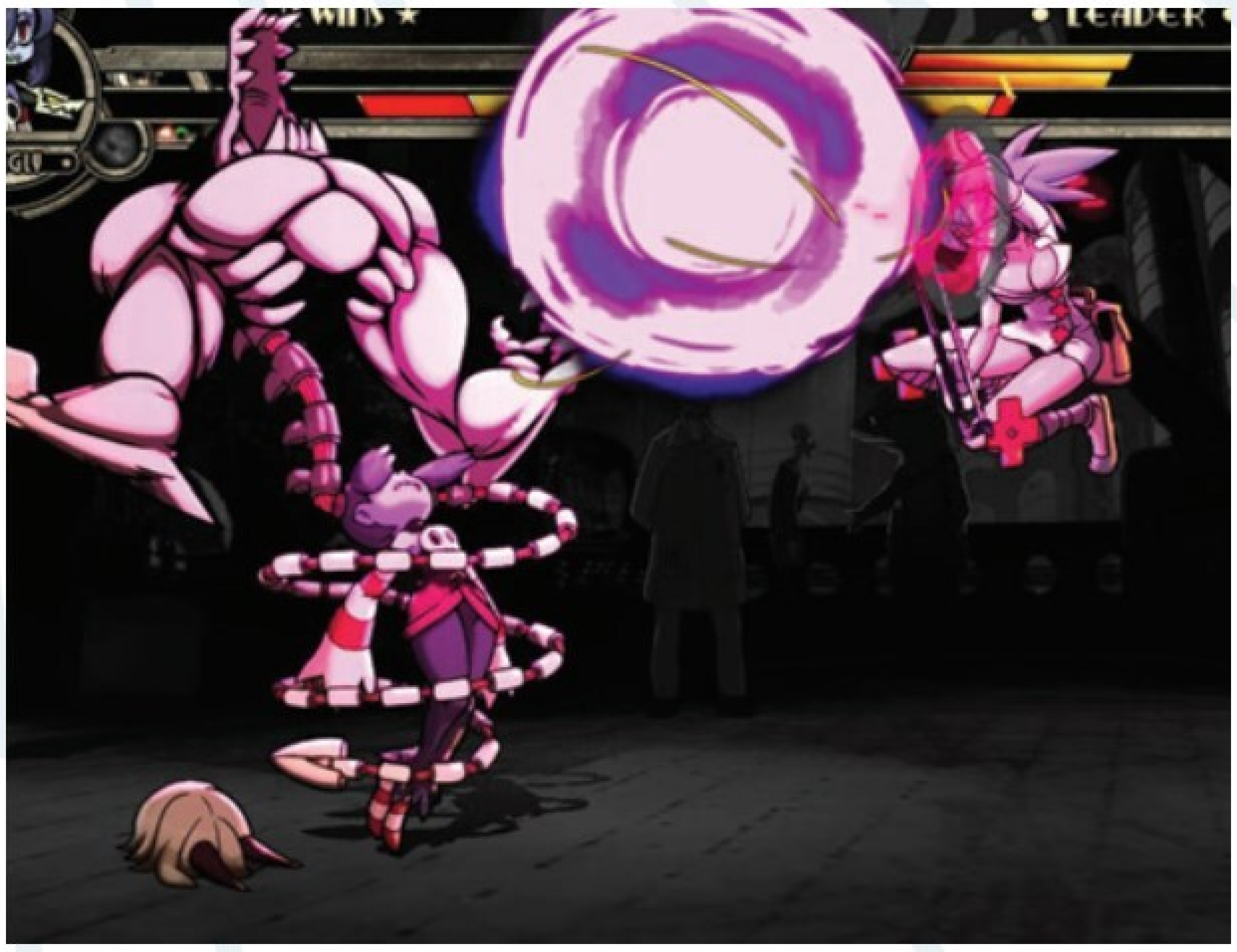
Bushido Blade answered the question, "How long would you last in a real swordfight" with demoralizing clarity: "Probably not very." The PlayStation game featured duos battling for supremacy, but its high-stakes combat was far removed from what the rest of the fighting-game genre was attempting. Here, battles could be over in a flash the moment combatants let their guard down. Skilled players could parry, roll, and use the terrain to their advantage, creating fights that felt as cinematic as they were brutal.

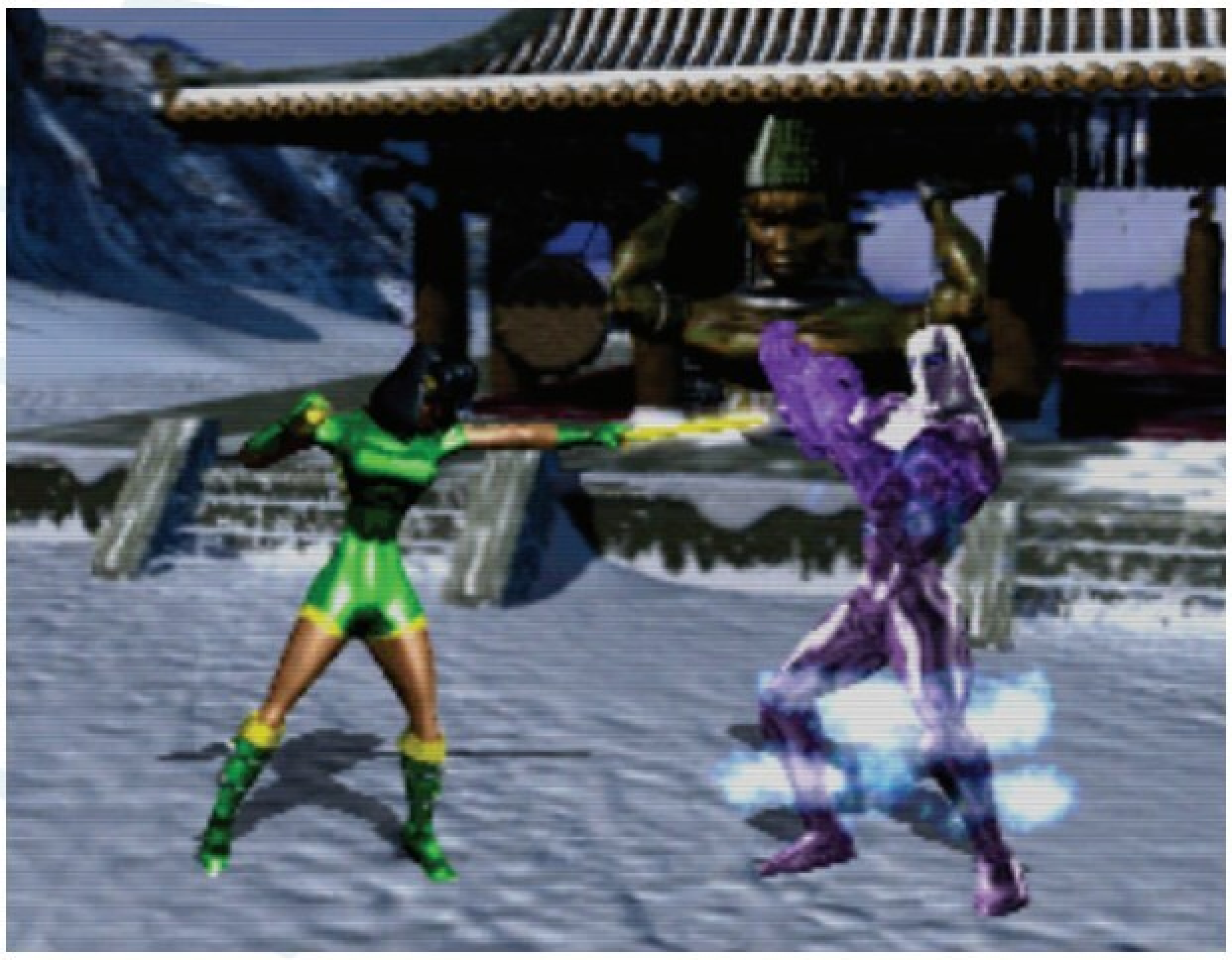


24 // SKULLGIRLS

PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PS3 • 360 • Vita
PC • Mac • Linux • Android • iOS • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Marvelous **DEVELOPER:** Reverge Labs
RELEASE: 2012

A lot of fighting games are inspired by anime, but few look as much like a cartoon come to life as Skullgirls. Before Dragon Ball FighterZ was even a dream, Reverge Labs' visually stunning fighter wowed us with chaotic team-based battles and a roster of monstrous hand-drawn fighters. Fortunately, Skullgirls' complex but approachable combat proved its beauty was more than skin-deep. An extensive tutorial system eased newcomers into advanced tactics, and its fluid action made Skullgirls a hard fighter to put down.





23 // KILLER INSTINCT

PLATFORM: Xbox One • SNES • Game Boy • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Midway, Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Rare **RELEASE:** 1994

In an era where "Mortal Kombat versus Street Fighter" arguments still permeated the playground, Rare brought in a newcomer to challenge the status quo. Killer Instinct's visuals and audio were mind-boggling at the time. Ticking up the combo meter to absurd heights while the boisterous announcer lost his mind over your accomplishments was always satisfying. The original may not hold up as well as its contemporaries, but its impact is undeniable. Plus, the current Killer Instinct is a well-regarded fighter that established a model for updates that many other fighters have followed.

22 // TEKKEN 3

PLATFORM: PS1 • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Namco
DEVELOPER: Namco
RELEASE: 1997

Tekken 3 was one of the most impressive sequels of its time, shaking up the foundation to the point that the roster offered more new faces than returning ones. Namco also refined the combat in a number of key ways, such as limiting jump heights and adding new evasive maneuvers (which include sidestepping). Executing 10-hit combos felt incredible, and mastering Lei Wulong's numerous fighting stances required a great degree of skill and offered something we didn't see much of in fighters at the time. The truest testament of its place in history: Tekken 3 still plays great today.

21 // SOULCALIBUR VI

PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • PC **PUBLISHER:** Bandai Namco Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Project Soul, Dimps **RELEASE:** 2018

After a brief hiatus following the release of the solid-but-divergent Soulcalibur V, Project Soul delivered a powerful return to form in Soulcalibur VI. A reboot that brought back several fan favorites to make the title familiar to fans who'd lapsed from the series, it also improved combat by choosing components from every other entry. It wasn't afraid to move forward, either, with a reversal edge technique that changed the pacing of each match and unique character traits that gave its classic characters newfound depth.

20 // MORTAL KOMBAT X

PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One
PC • Android • iOS
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros.
Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: NetherRealm Studios
RELEASE: 2015

If you couldn't tell from our cover, we're still big Mortal Kombat fans, and MK X shows why. NetherRealm simply never stops revitalizing its classic series, or the genre as a whole. While the gruesome X-ray attacks and absurd fatalities still delivered the gore MK was founded on, a wealth of modes and multiple fighting styles for each character gave fans more ways to compete than ever. The Living Towers mode also added massive doses of replayability, with constantly changing scenarios. Mortal Kombat X's visceral matches left us wanting more, and with MK 11 on the horizon, we're not complaining.

19 // ULTIMATE MARVEL VS. CAPCOM 3

PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • Vita • PC
PUBLISHER: Capcom **DEVELOPER:** Capcom, Eighting
RELEASE: 2011

Originally seen as a bit of an oversimplification of Marvel vs. Capcom 2's freeform combo system, Marvel vs. Capcom 3 proved to be its own formidable beast. Armed with one of the most diverse rosters this side of Smash Bros., players eventually found infinites, glitches, and more ways to extend life-ending combos into the hundreds. With some ingenuity, you could combo practically anything into anything. The imbalance and chaos worked on some strange level, turning into a game that kept players tinkering and spectators riveted for years.

18 // STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 3

PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PS2 • PS1
Dreamcast • PSP • GBA • PC • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Capcom **DEVELOPER:** Capcom
RELEASE: 1998

Arcade goers expected more of the same from the third iteration in the series, but Street Fighter Alpha 3 shook up Capcom's tried-and-true formula with the addition of three fighting styles called "isms." Being able to harness the combat flow of Street Fighter Alpha: Warriors' Dreams (A-ism), Street Fighter Alpha 2 (V-ism), and Super Street Fighter II Turbo (X-ism) completely shook up the speed, offense, and defense for each character. Alpha 3 also added more defensive strategies with perfect block timing.

17 // SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE

PLATFORM: Switch
PUBLISHER: Nintendo **DEVELOPER:** Bandai Namco, Sora Ltd. **RELEASE:** 2018

Using Ultimate as the subtitle for an entry in a long-running series is dangerous, especially when the Smash Bros. purists already know their personal favorite (yes, you'll see it later in this list), but the latest Smash Bros. earns the term. Featuring every character that has ever appeared in Smash Bros. and more on the way, Ultimate represents the pinnacle of the series in terms of content. It also nailed its moment-to-moment combat by hewing closer to the high-speed fighting of Melee.

16 // DRAGON BALL FIGHTERZ

PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco Entertainment **DEVELOPER:** Arc System Works **RELEASE:** 2018

FighterZ may be one of the more recently released games on this list, but we're confident in its placement and honestly would not be surprised to see it place even higher if we revisit this list in the future. Plenty of Dragon Ball fighting games have come and gone, but FighterZ is easily the best. Along with being a fantastic fighting game on its own, it did an amazing job of emulating and improving on the visuals of the source material. It found a foothold in the competitive circuit right away, and Arc System Works has only improved the game post-release.

15 // FATAL FURY: MARK OF THE WOLVES

PLATFORM: PS4 • 360 • PS2 • Neo Geo • Vita • PC • iOS
PUBLISHER: SNK **DEVELOPER:** SNK
RELEASE: 2001

As proper a send-off as any series can ask for, Mark of the Wolves ended Fatal Fury's run before folding completely into the King of Fighters series on a simple-but-elegant, high note. It featured the Tactical Offense Position (T.O.P) system, which asks players to choose whether they want to be powered-up (and gain access to new super moves) when their health is high, medium, or low. This forces you to make a gambit before a match even starts: Do you want to establish an early lead, or save room for a clutch comeback? It doesn't rely on too many elaborate gimmicks; this fighter isn't afraid to stand strong on its fundamentals.

14 // VIRTUA FIGHTER 5

PLATFORM: PS3 • 360 • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Sega **DEVELOPER:** Sega AM2 **RELEASE:** 2007

Virtua Fighter has always had a reputation for being one the most technically sound 3D fighters out there, and no entry proved that more than Virtua Fighter 5. The 17 combatants were balanced, rich in moves, and each required a different mindset to control. This is one of those fighters that rewarded you for taking time to understand the nuances of each character, and the timing of their move delivery and animation follow-throughs. You can't button mash your way through this one.

0
PRESS START
Lilith
92
Anakaris

13 // DARKSTALKERS III

PLATFORM: PS1 • Saturn • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Capcom **DEVELOPER:** Capcom
RELEASE: 1997

This horror-themed series owes as much to Capcom's work with Marvel Super Heroes as it does to movies like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. Characters were constantly in motion, nearly filling the screen with high-quality (and often hilarious) animations. Thanks to the Dark Force System, players could spend a portion of their super to perform limited special movies, such as summoning Sasquatch's army of penguin pals. While the series has gone stagnant, characters including Morrigan and B.B. Hood often join the rosters in Capcom's other series.

12 // THE KING OF FIGHTERS 2002 UNLIMITED MATCH

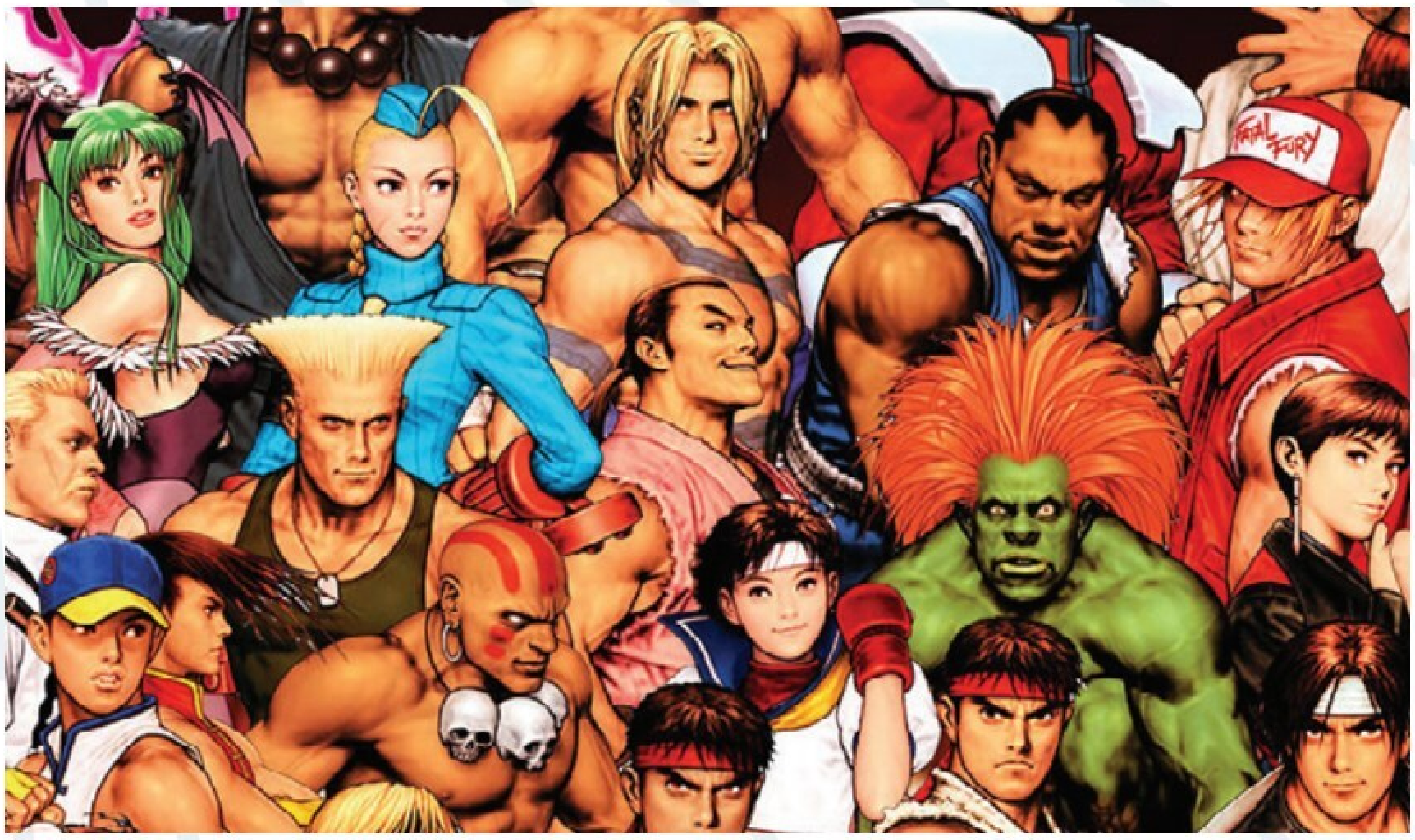
PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PS3 • 360
PS2 • Xbox • Neo Geo • PC • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Playmore **DEVELOPER:** Eolith
RELEASE: 2005

For King of Fighters 2002, Eolith went back to the basics for a series of three-on-three battles that became the most-polished entry in the series. At the time, KOF 2002 included every character from all previous King of Fighters games, giving fans an unprecedented number of dream matchups. This impressive roster made KOF 2002 highly replayable, as players experimented with different teams and had to learn the various interactions between all fighters. Even a decade and a half later, Unlimited Match still lives up to its royal title.

11 // CAPCOM VS. SNK 2: MARK OF THE MILLENNIUM 2001

PLATFORM: PS2 • Xbox • GameCube • Dreamcast • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Capcom **DEVELOPER:** Capcom **RELEASE:** 2001

Capcom's other, less-famous crossover series went for broke as a celebration of fighting games. Not only does its roster deliver a who's-who of the two most revered developers in the genre at the time, but its very DNA is a love letter. Its six distinct "grooves," each bearing one of the letters from the acronym "CAP SNK," fundamentally altered how you played. Want to dish out Street Fighter Alpha's custom combos? Choose A-Groove. Want Mark of the Wolves' Just-Defends and Samurai Shodown's rage meter? Go for K-Groove. A ratio system also let you power up your best character, making for a fighter with a staggering degree of customization.



10 // SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV: ARCADE EDITION

PLATFORM: PS3 • 360 • PC • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: Capcom, Dimps
RELEASE: 2010

When it originally released, Street Fighter IV was largely responsible for the mainstream resurgence of fighting games. It garnered an audience beyond the usual genre devotees, and Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition's 2012 patch represents the pinnacle of that original game's evolution. With an excellent selection of cool characters, plus balance tweaks that polished combat to a mirror sheen, this is the definitive way to experience one of the most influential modern fighters.

09 // SAMURAI SHODOWN II

PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PS3 • 360 • Wii • PS1 • Neo Geo
Neo Geo CD • Neo Geo Pocket Color • PC • Android • iOS • Arcade
PUBLISHER: SNK **DEVELOPER:** SNK **RELEASE:** 1994

Weighing in at 202 MB on a Neo Geo cartridge, Samurai Shodown 2 was a sequel built independent of the original game, giving developer SNK more freedom to innovate. The changes included a more diverse move set consisting of the ability to break enemy weapons, dodge roll, and parry. These abilities combined to create unique strategies, with players looking for windows to disarm their opponent or deliver a powerful fatal strike. SNK continues to pump out fighting games, but none have delivered intensity on the same level as Samurai Shodown II.

08 // GUILTY GEAR XRD

PLATFORM: PS4 • PS3 • PC
PUBLISHER: Arc System Works
DEVELOPER: Arc System Works
RELEASE: 2014

The Guilty Gear series has long been known for its deluge of arcane systems, cancels, and tricky combos, but Xrd found an incredible balance between stripping the chaff without losing the essence fans of its aggressively stylish and busy action had come to love. Boasting an immaculate anime art style in the Unreal Engine and a roster that constantly asks you to learn new mechanics and approaches without overwhelming you, Guilty Gear Xrd is a fighter's fighting game, and even five years into its life cycle, it can still rock with the best of them as the crown jewel in developer Arc System Works' diverse fighting-game catalog.

07 // TEKKEN 7

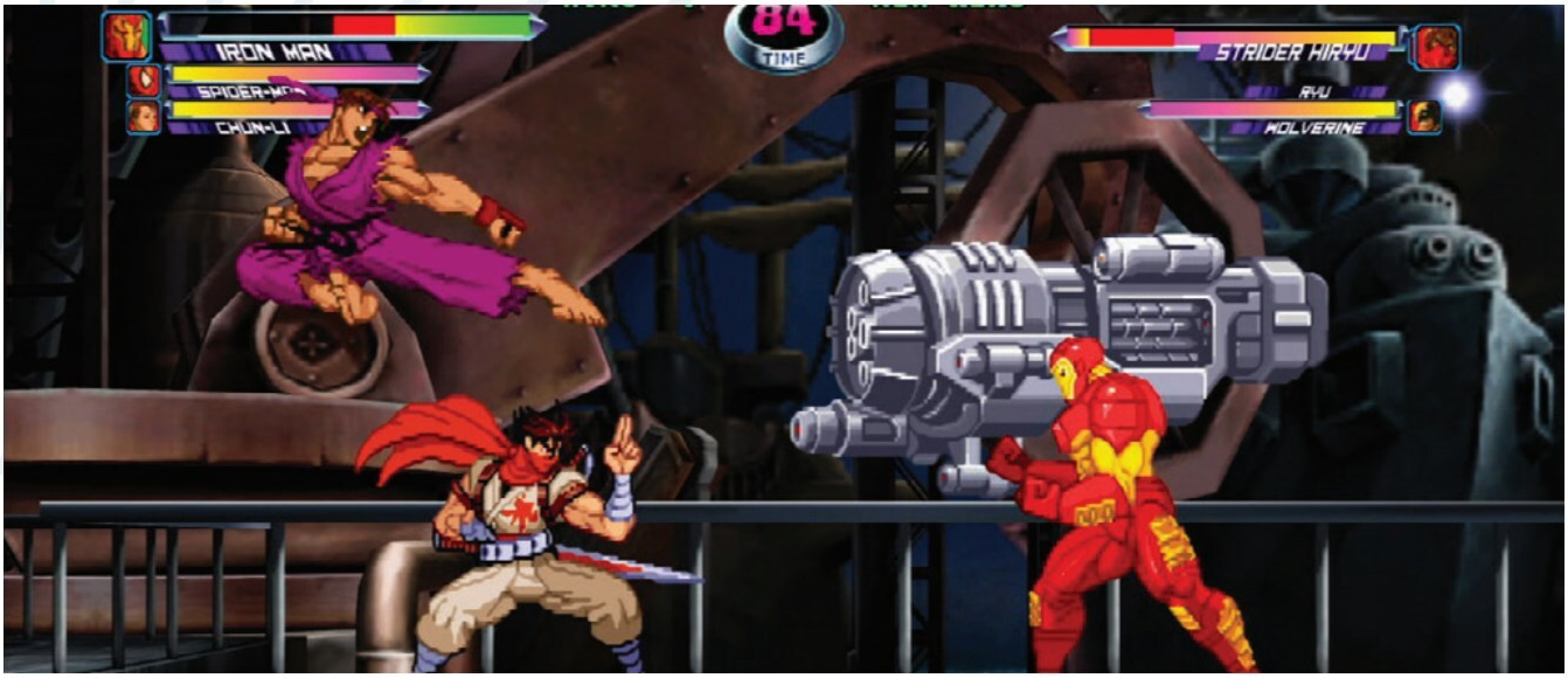
PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • PC • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco Entertainment **DEVELOPER:** Bandai Namco Studios **RELEASE:** 2017

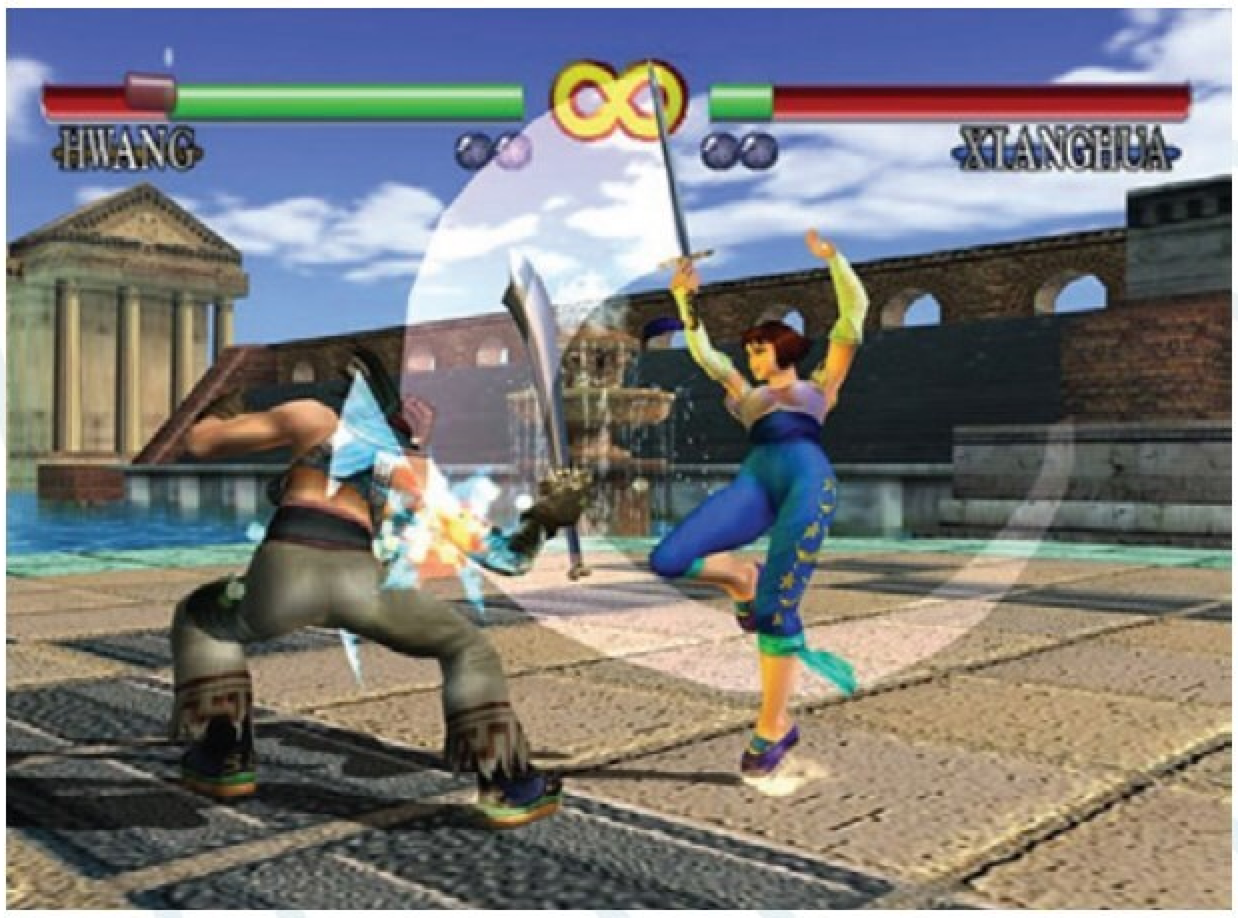
The latest entry in the storied 3D fighting franchise is also its best. Bandai Namco continued to update and improve the series with a more dynamic and impactful camera, an expanded Rage system, and a massive roster full of new and fan-favorite characters. While the story mode offered an uneven conclusion of the decades-old rivalry between Heihachi and Kazuya Mishima, the core gameplay still had incredible depth for devoted fans, with 100-plus moves to learn and master for every fighter.

06 // MARVEL VS. CAPCOM 2: NEW AGE OF HEROES

PLATFORM: PS3 • 360 • PS2 • Xbox • Dreamcast • iOS • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Capcom **DEVELOPER:** Capcom **RELEASE:** 2000

The fighting genre is no stranger to mashing up disparate franchises to create games with diverse casts, but Marvel vs. Capcom 2 was arguably one of the most ambitious attempts to pit superheroes against video game characters. Each of its 55 characters were meticulously animated with beautiful 2D sprites and you could play with three at a time to pull off screen-filling combos that are mind-blowing even by our modern, admittedly hardened standards. It also introduced us to the "I wanna take you for a ride" menu music, which is now stuck in your head. You're welcome.

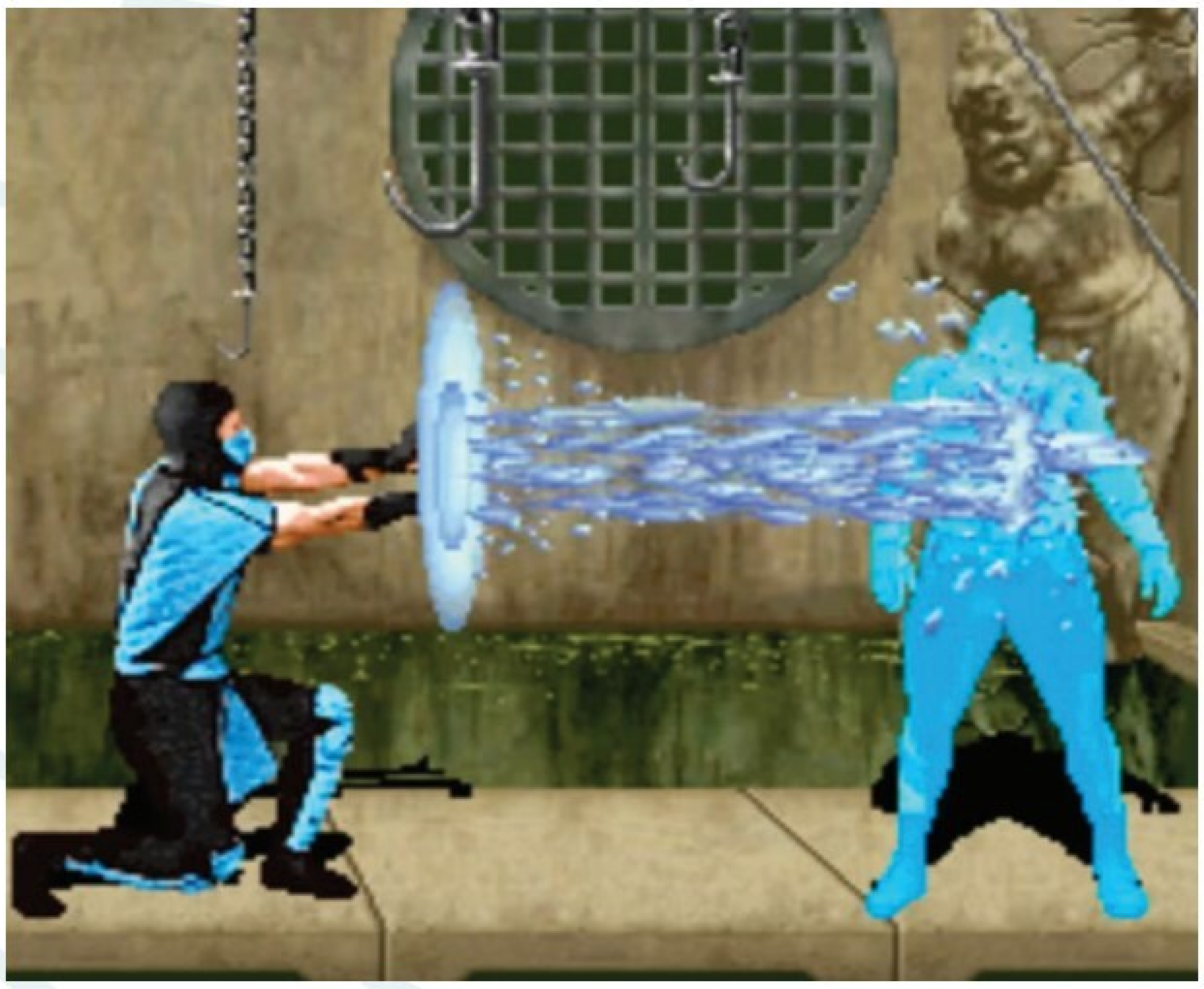




05 // SOULCALIBUR

PLATFORM: 360 • Dreamcast • Android • iOS • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Namco **DEVELOPER:** Project Soul
RELEASE: 1998

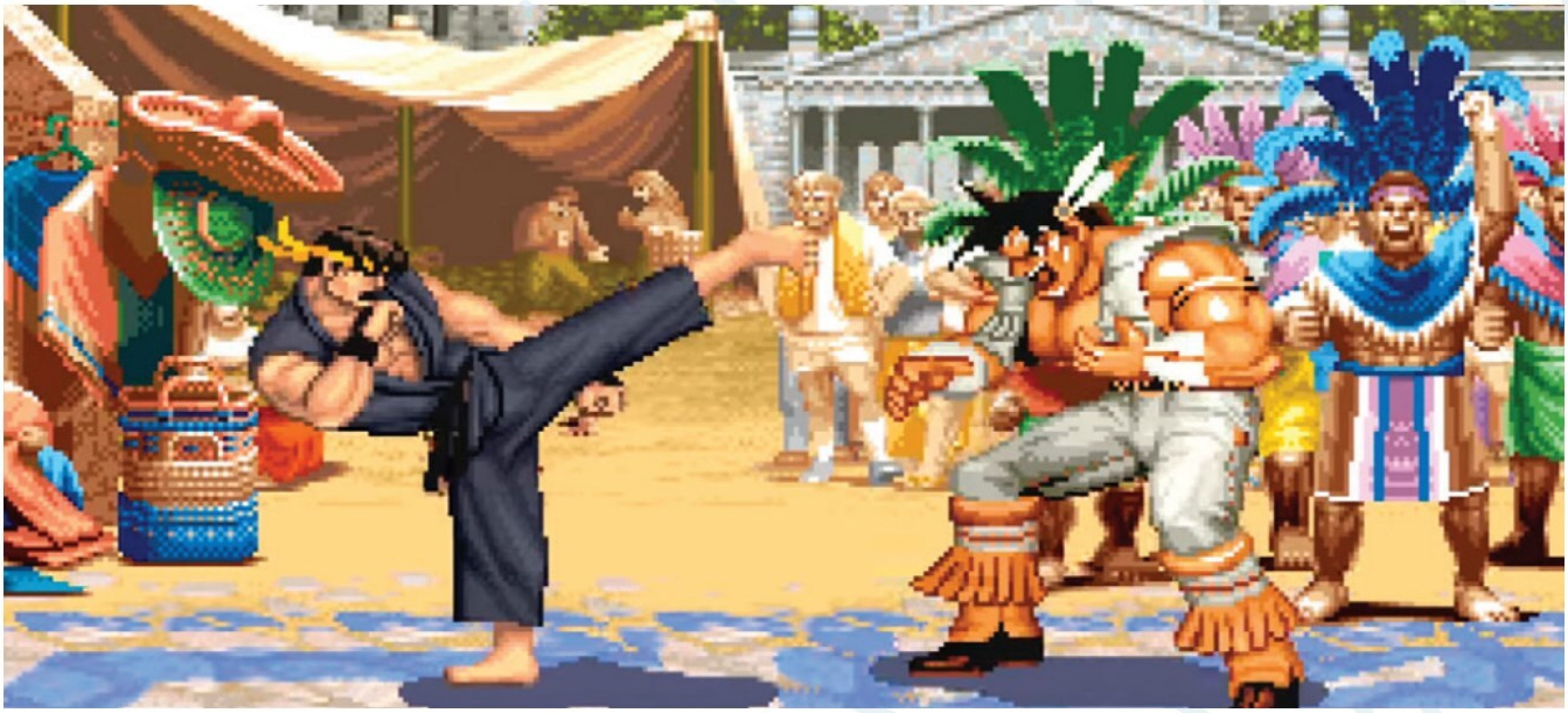
Like most classic fighting games, Soulcalibur originally released in arcades. However, Namco's weapon-based fighter quickly became synonymous with the Dreamcast thanks to a stellar launch port that actually upped the visuals of its arcade predecessor. Fighting fans fell in love with the freedom of Soulcalibur's eight-direction movement and lenient combo system, and the diverse, weapon-focused combat was accentuated by a cast of memorable characters. Even today, Soulcalibur still feels distinct, making it not only the best Dreamcast game of all time, but one of the best fighting games, as well.



04 // MORTAL KOMBAT II

PLATFORM: PS3 • 360 • PS1 • Saturn • Sega 32X • SNES
Genesis • Sega Master System • Game Gear • PC • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Midway **DEVELOPER:** Midway
RELEASE: 1993

The first Mortal Kombat gained notoriety for its over-the-top violence, but the sequel gave it credibility as a fighter. There were still plenty of shocking moments and gruesome fatalities, but it was all supported by more engaging combat mechanics. It was also stuffed to the brim with secrets, including tongue-in-cheek alternatives to finishing your foes, such as babalities and friendships, that broke players' brains in arcades.



03 // SUPER STREET FIGHTER II TURBO

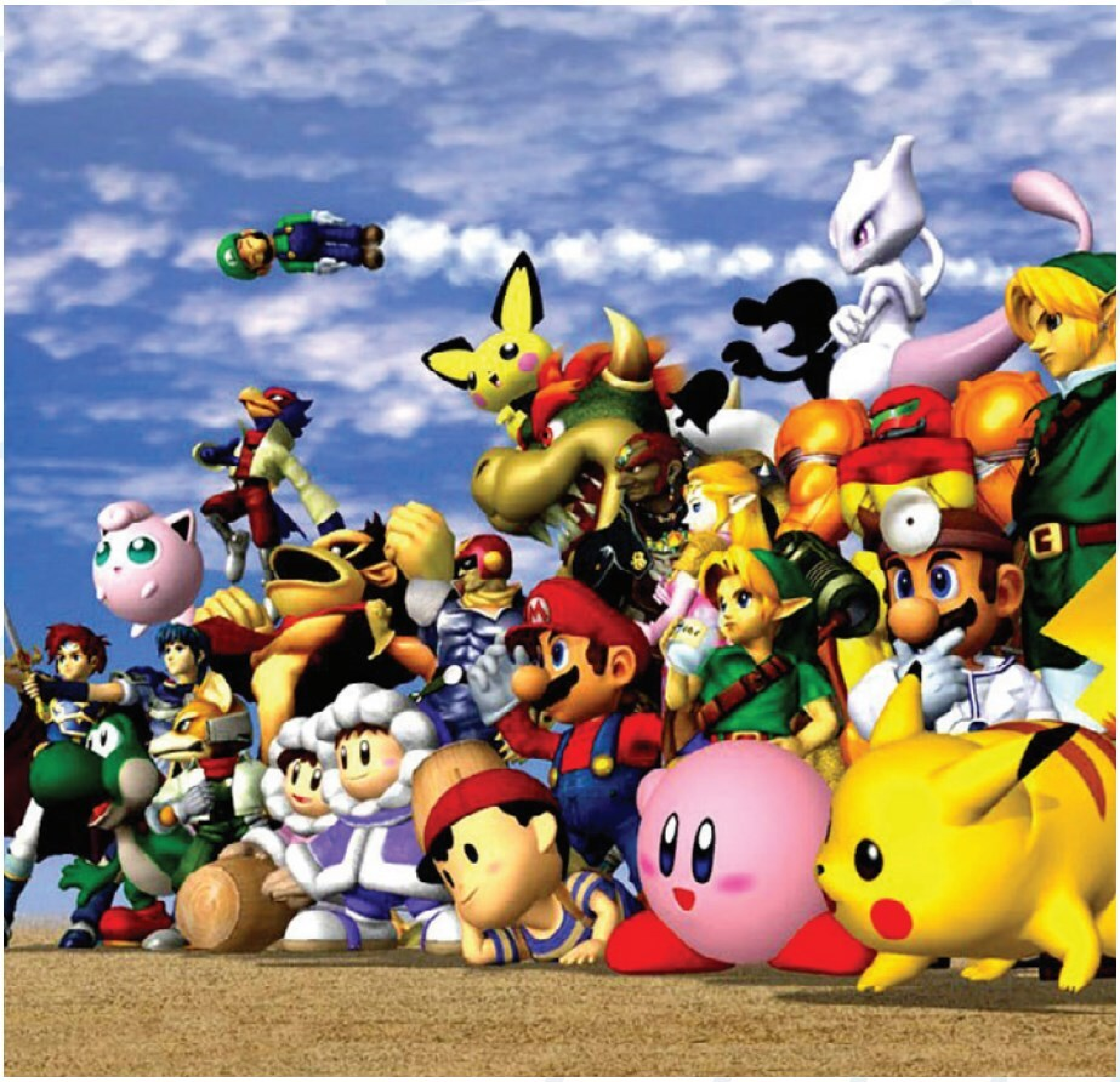
PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PS3 • 360 • Wii U • PS2 • Xbox • PS1 • GBA
Dreamcast • Saturn • 3DO • Amiga CD32 • Amiga • PC • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Capcom **DEVELOPER:** Capcom **RELEASE:** 1994

Super Street Fighter II Turbo was the culmination of a string of incremental updates to Capcom's classic fighter, adding new combo types and introducing the world to a flame-haired fellow named Akuma. Street Fighter II was in many ways the primordial reference point for the genre, and this version is its most refined form. As a testament to its relevance, it's still played competitively at Evo – not bad for a game that's older than many of its players.

02 // SUPER SMASH BROS. MELEE

PLATFORM: GameCube
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: HAL Laboratory
RELEASE: 2001

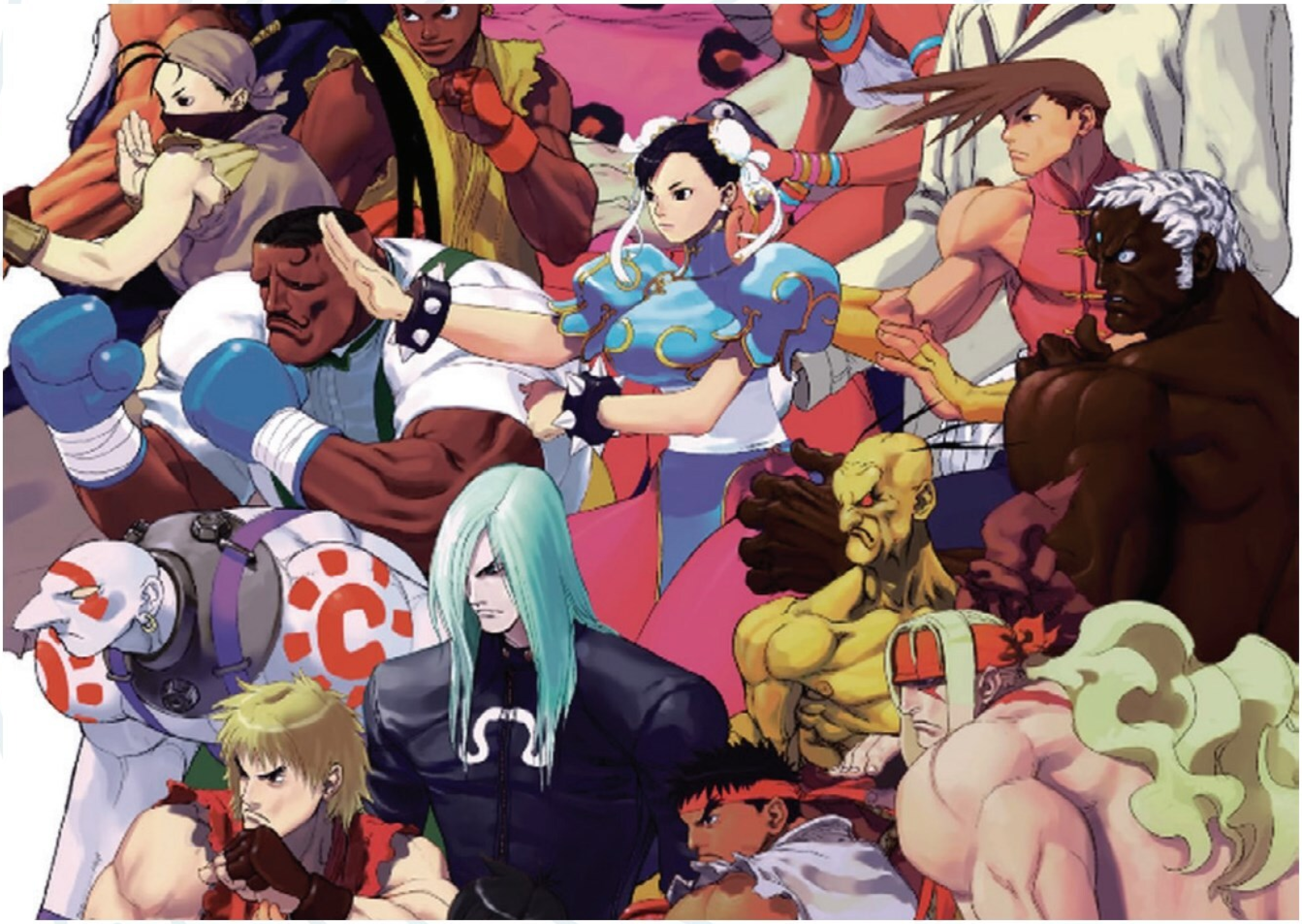
Super Smash Bros. doesn't use traditional fighting game mechanics, and it's one of its greatest strengths. That, and it features some of the greatest video game characters of all time all mashed up into one fantastically fun brawler. We adore Smash Bros., with or without items, as there is just something supremely satisfying about taking control of Link and using him to send Mario flying off the side of a floating platform with a perfectly timed Smash attack. Melee stands tall as the fastest and most mechanically polished entry in the series to the point that even three console generations later, it is still a tournament staple.

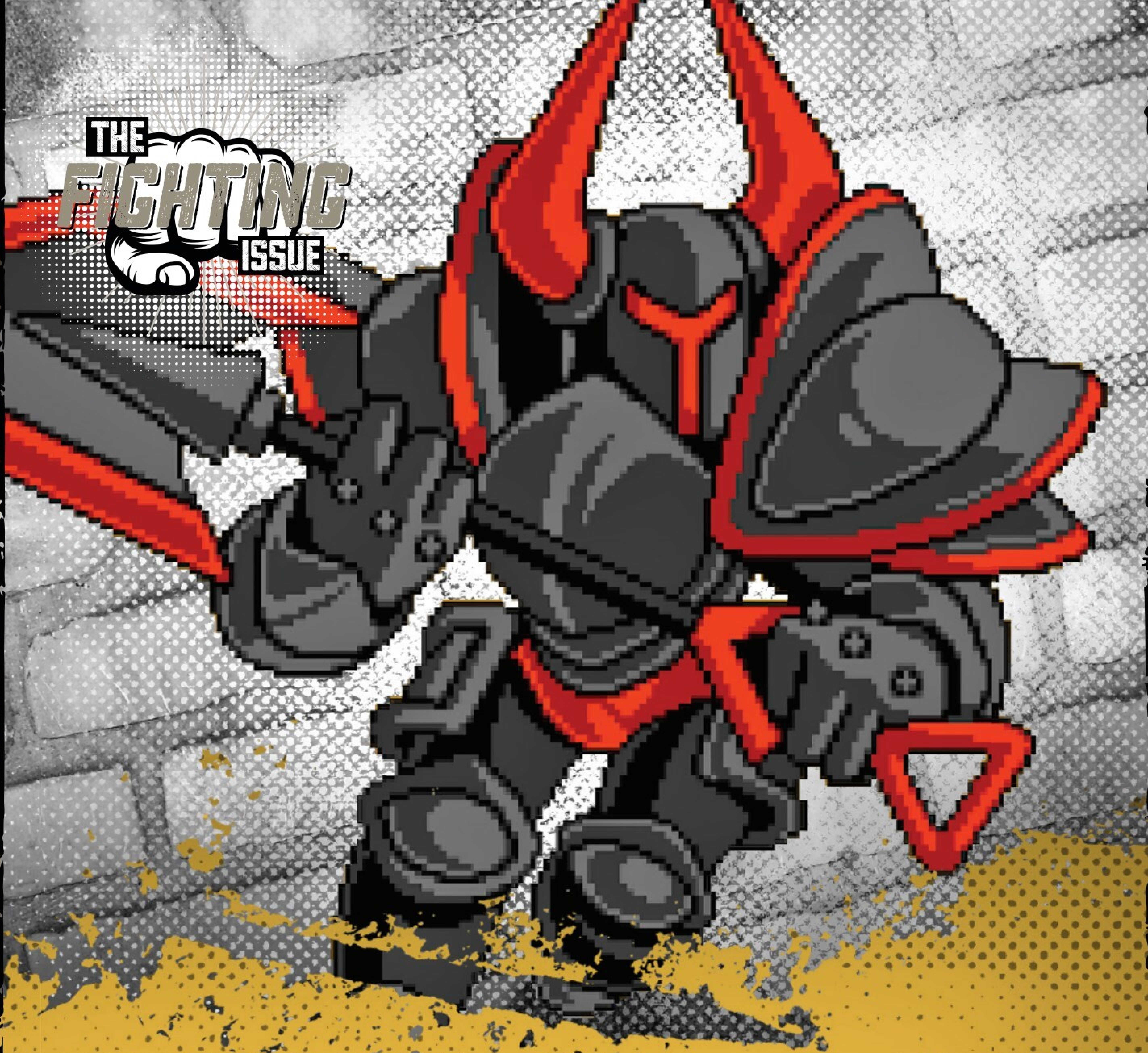


01 // STREET FIGHTER III: THIRD STRIKE

PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PS2 • Xbox • Dreamcast • PC • Arcade
PUBLISHER: Capcom **DEVELOPER:** Capcom **RELEASE:** 2000

How do you improve on a worldwide phenomenon and genre breakthrough like Street Fighter II? By implementing techniques the genre had birthed since that momentous game (such as throw-teching and enhanced specials) to create pitch-perfect pacing over three renditions, then throwing in a powerful new catalyst: parrying. If you dare to risk it all by pressing forward rather back when an attack is about to land, you can turn the momentum of a fight in your favor on a dime. Throw in some jaw-dropping sprite animations, a soundtrack that borrowed from a wealth of genres, and a cast that mixed old favorites and weirdos, and you have Street Fighter III: Third Strike, the best fighting game of all time. ◆





TEN

FIGHTING GAMES

ON THE HORIZON

Peek into the future of the fighting game scene, where a bevy of independent creators each look to carve out a niche.

BY GAME INFORMER STAFF

SHOVEL KNIGHT SHOWDOWN

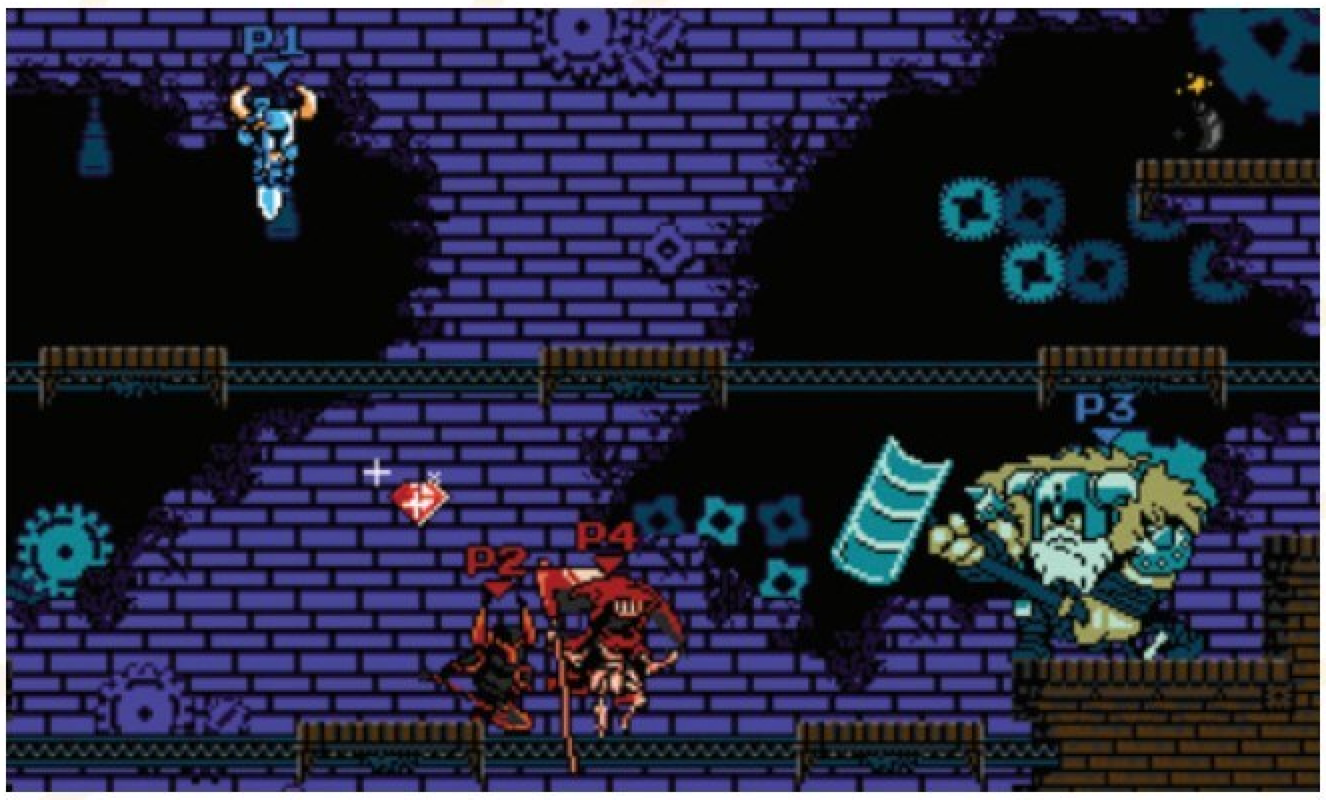
PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PS3 • Wii U • PC
RELEASE: TBA

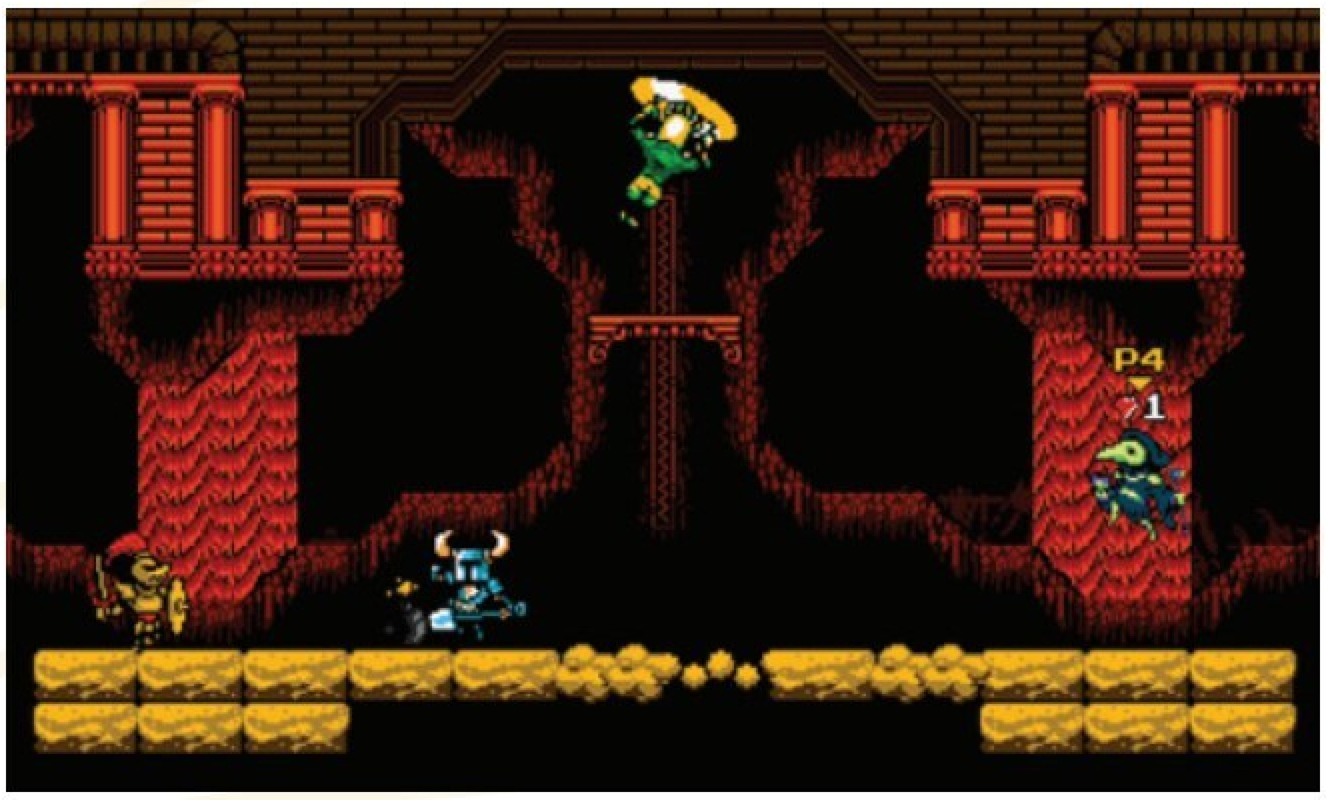
If you thought Shovel Knight came out five years ago, you'd be correct – but development on the retro platformer continues beyond its initial release. Yacht Club games has spent the intervening years creating various updates (like new playable characters with unique campaigns), and one of the upcoming additions should be of particular interest to fighting-game fans.

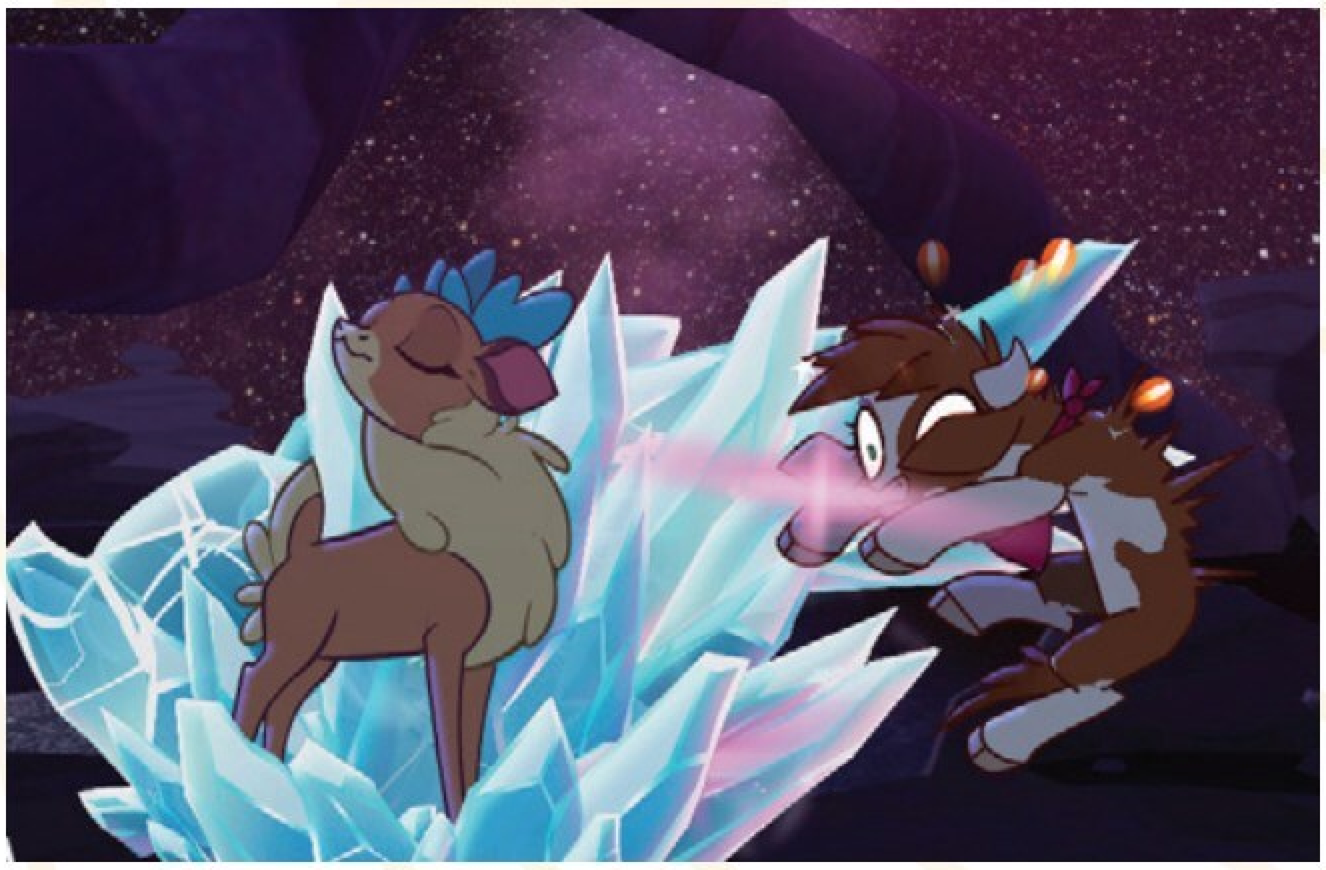
Shovel Knight Showdown features local multiplayer battles starring the heroes and villains of the saga. Players can choose among new and familiar characters, like Shield Knight, Plague Knight, and the Enchantress. Using their unique weapons and movesets, these warriors fight it out across multiple modes, including duels, team matches, and four-player free-for-alls. Yacht Club says the game has over 16 characters, so that leaves room for plenty of crazy match-up permutations.

If you'd rather play solo than brawl with friends, Showdown also has a story mode. Here, you select a character and compete against A.I. opponents in multiple stages (some new, and some inspired by existing Shovel Knight characters and levels). Elements of this story mode (like the rival you face) are customized depending on the fighter you select, so each run can provide something a little different.

Though originally scheduled to launch in April, Showdown was recently delayed so Yacht Club could add a final coat of polish. Here's the good news: If you already own Shovel Knight Treasure Trove, Showdown will be released as a free update, and it will also be available as a stand-alone experience for $10.







THEM'S FIGHTIN' HERDS

PLATFORM: PC • Mac • Linux
RELEASE: 2019

If all-female, four-legged, hoofed combat is the genre mashup you've been waiting for, developer Mane6 has you covered. Them's Fightin' Herds has taken a circuitous route to reach gaming screens; it's the spiritual successor to a fan project that starred characters from *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* (entitled Fighting Is Magic). After Hasbro put its hoof down on that project, the team created a whole new roster with the help of Lauren Faust, the creator of *Friendship is Magic*. The resulting fighter is charming, funny, wonderfully animated, and deeper than it might first appear.

While the ungulate fighting game has a small roster by genre standards, each character is unique. A western-themed cow, a fashion-obsessed reindeer, a dark-magic-wielding unicorn, a gleefully bouncing alpaca, a terrified sheep (and her sheepdogs), and a half-horse/half-dragon all exhibit tons of personality through their voice lines and animations. A dynamic music system reacts to the battles as they unfold, layering in character-specific touches to the tunes to denote current advantage.

The four-button layout allows for an impressive mix of attacks, including a dedicated "magic" button devoted to especially interesting character-specific moves. After playing several rounds, the online and offline multiplayer both feel tight and fast, and there's a lot of joy in learning each character's unusual moveset. While the animal nature of the combatants is odd at first, the four-legged movement styles help the game stand apart.

Them's Fightin' Herds is available now in Early Access, though the story mode won't be implemented until full release. In the meantime, a colorful aesthetic and unpretentious humor should attract the faithful, even if these pugnacious girls aren't actually ponies.

METAL REVOLUTION

PLATFORM: PS4 • PC • iOS
RELEASE: 2019 (PC), TBA (PS4, iOS)

The fighting genre has a reputation of being hard to learn and master due to intricate combos that can easily spell victory or defeat. Metal Revolution from Chinese indie studio Next Studios is eschewing rote complexity in favor of a combat system that rewards players of all levels and play styles with simple commands that can be comboed and timed appropriately to powerful effect.

The core of Metal Revolution is an energy bar that's spent performing specials (each fighter has three), blocking, dashing, etc. Run out at a critical moment and your guard breaks, leaving you vulnerable. Parry at the right time and not only do you gain energy, but you can burst out of it to start your own attack.

Combined with the characteristics of the announced eight fighters (including a sword-wielding, range-fighter Yakuza and a close-range football player), players are going to be focused more on managing space and exploiting openings than fighting with the controller itself. Grabs (including mid-air ones for grapplers), crossups to surprise an opponent, and super attacks only available when your health is low give you offensive and defensive options in myriad situations.

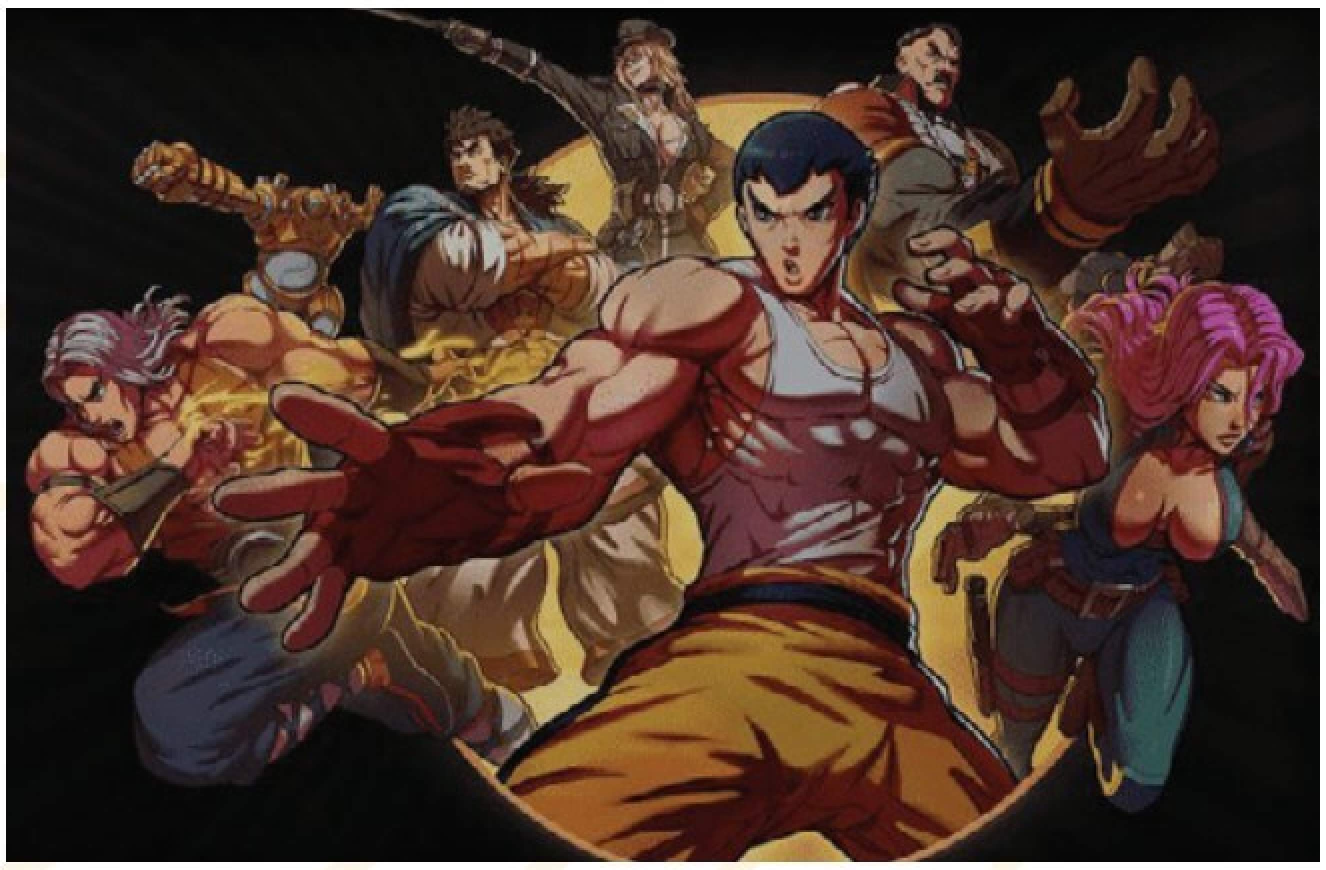
The developer plans to double the number of fighters by the end of the year, and, along with various skins, they can be bought or unlocked via in-game currency. As for modes, Metal Revolution is starting out with online ranked and casual play (the game has cross-play), local fights (including versus A.I.), and training. After launch, a story mode delving into the fighters' backstories will also be released. Perhaps by then the game's intuitive approach to the genre will have caught the eye of hardcore and casual fighting fans alike.

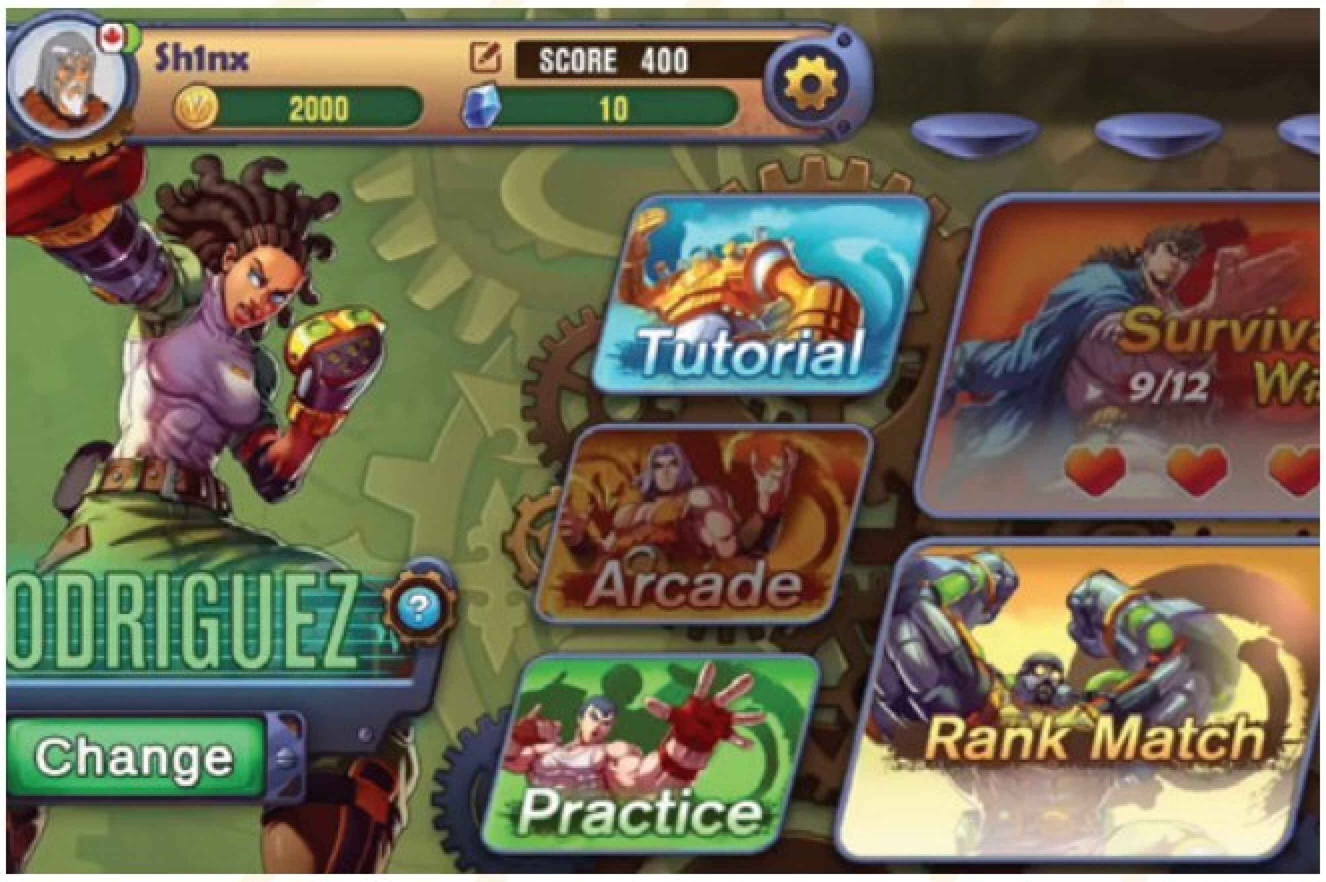
HERO VERSUS: THE LEGEND OF KI MASTERS

PLATFORM: Switch • PC • iOS • Android
RELEASE: 2019

Mobile platforms seem like an ill fit for hyper-competitive fighting games, but The Versus Corp. is intent on adapting the combo-heavy fighting genre to touchscreen. Using a virtual joystick, players move their fighters across the ring. However, instead of using complex controller inputs to unleash special attacks, Hero Versus' players can initiate them with the tap of a single button. Players perform basic attacks by tapping or swiping the touchscreen, but those more powerful button attacks come with a cooldown. This streamlined combat system should offer Hero Versus newcomers an easy learning curve, but hardcore fighting fans will still have plenty of opportunity to master the nuance and timing of each attack.

Hero Versus' roster of 12 anime-inspired fighters includes knife-wielding female commandos, berserker werewolves, and stretchy-armed robots. The Versus Corp. hopes to build a robust community of players thanks to built-in social features that allow users to send each other texts and other social messaging notifications. The Versus Corp. aims to release Hero Versus as a free-to-play game later this year. The title is already in beta on iOS and Android, but fighting-game fans who need a tactile joystick might want to wait for the Switch and PC versions.





PUNCH PLANET

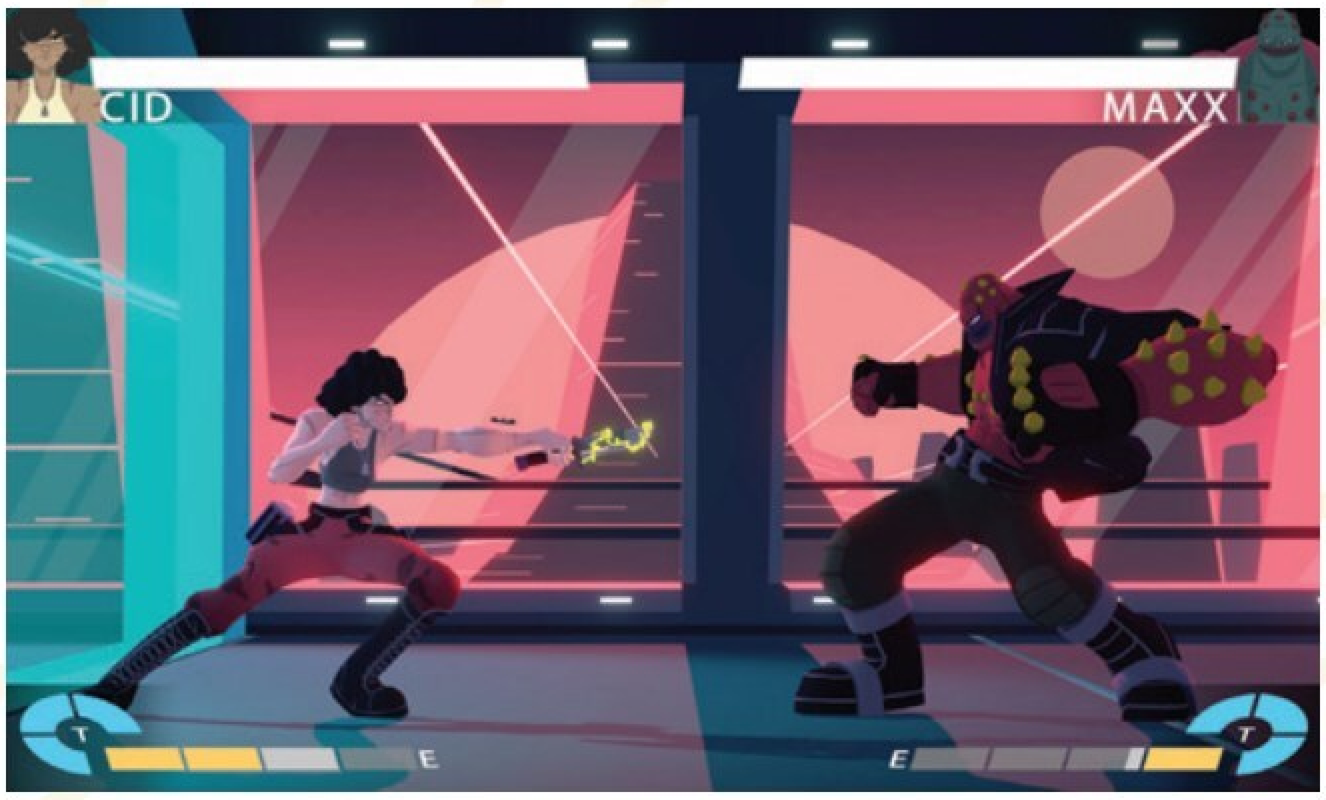
PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: TBD

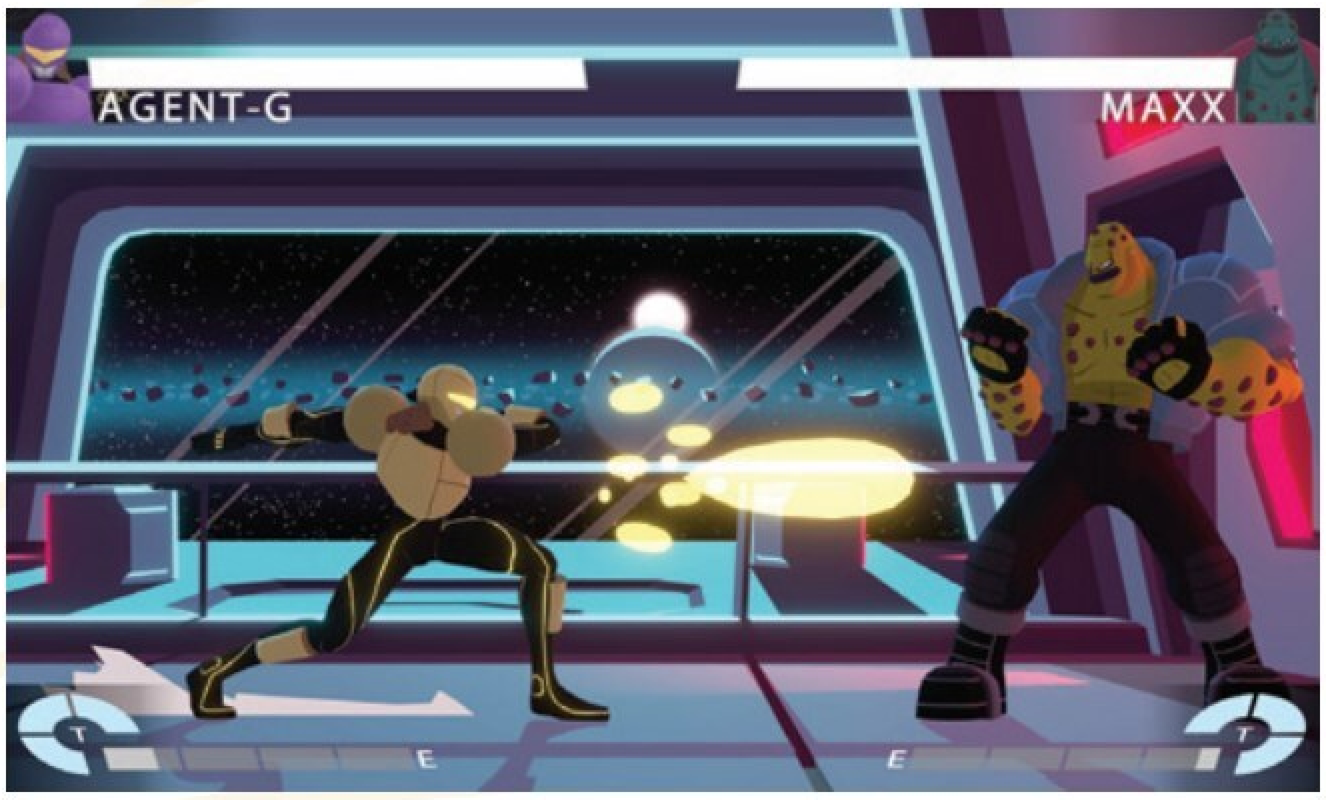
With a name like Punch Planet, you may not expect this indie fighter from Sector-K Games to take itself too seriously. You'd be right – at least in terms of the game's tongue-in-cheek tone and outlandish roster that includes aliens, a robot, and a surprisingly ordinary-looking dog. Maybe it's some kind of space dog?

When it comes to core mechanics, Punch Planet isn't joking around. Throws, wall bounces, air juggles, and off-the-ground attacks give players plenty of options for long and fluid combos. Punch Planet also features an energy meter that fuels advanced attacks and enhanced special moves, and a time meter that allows fighters to cancel incoming hits and hit stuns.

Sector-K is also planning a full slate of game modes. Currently, players can take on other fighters in local and online competitive multiplayer, and hone their skills in CPU versus matches and an in-depth training mode complete with viewable hitboxes. At launch, Punch Planet will also feature an Arcade mode, various trials and challenges, and a full-fledged story mode that follows an undercover Luna PD detective named Roy as he tries to clear his name for a murder he didn't commit…primarily by punching people and shooting them with his laser pistol.

As you can tell from the screens, Punch Planet features a colorful, cartoony art style and looks even better in motion. Early reception has been positive, with fans comparing the mechanics and flow of play to the Street Fighter games, so if you're looking for an entertaining, sci-fi spin on Capcom's classic series, check it out.





KILL LA KILL – IF

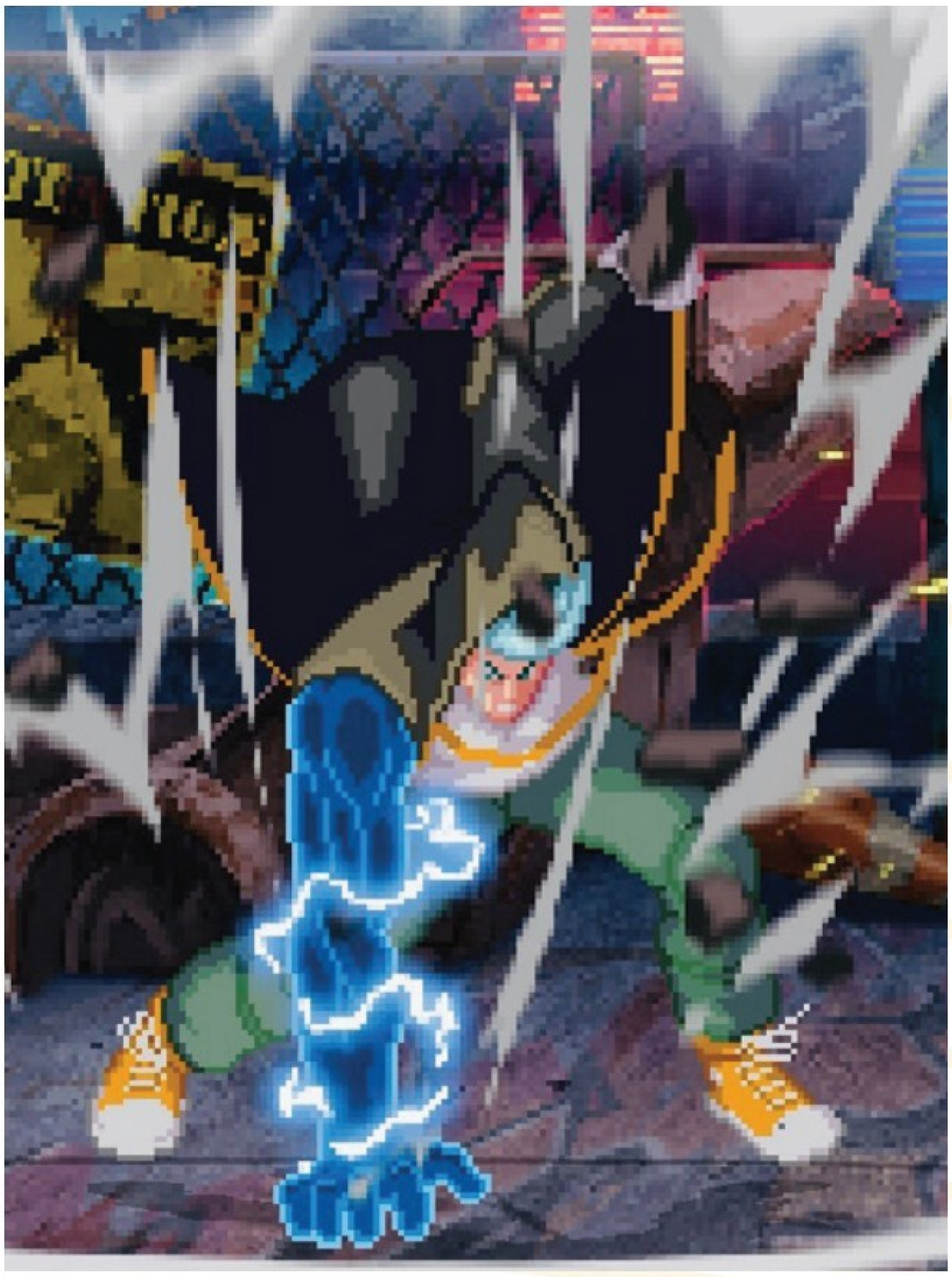
PLATFORM: PS4 • Switch • PC
RELEASE: July 26

The *Kill la Kill* anime follows the exploits of Ryuko Matoi. Ryoko wields one half of a giant scissor weapon as she hunts for her father's killer though Honouji Academy, an oppressive school ruled by student council president Satsuki Kiryuin. The anime's action is fast and expressive, while its general aesthetic is focused on fashion, as the characters' clothing plays a major part in the plot and their assorted abilities.

Considering the combat-intensive source material, it's not surprising that *Kill la Kill*'s first video game adaptation is a fighting game. Arc System Works, the developer behind Dragon Ball FighterZ, is publishing the game. Arc System Works' past games have showcased an impressive ability to adapt 2D art into 3D, and even though it is only serving as publisher (A+ Games is developing) that awesome style is fully on display here.

The actual gameplay functions a bit like an arena fighter. Characters can move freely in the 3D space and bounce in and out to clash against one another. A+ Games is keeping the action generally simple with rock-paper-scissor Venn diagram of attacks, evasions, guards, and big flashy break attacks that show off the game's impressive animation. All the characters play similarly, but they have specific attacks and stats that make them distinct. You can also choose to play with either Japanese or English voiceover.

Anime video game adaptions miss more often than they hit, but Arc System Works' involvement as publisher makes us optimistic. Kill la Kill the anime has great action that certainly has the potential to be a fun video game, and with the developer behind Dragon Ball FighterZ on hand to help with development, we're hopeful.



BLAZING STRIKE

PLATFORM: PS4 • Switch • PC
RELEASE: 2019

It's no secret that series like Street Fighter and The King of Fighters laid the foundations for fighting games today, and Blazing Strike hopes to pay loving homage to those trailblazers. Pitched as a unique take on the classic 2D fighting formula, Blazing Strike implements new mechanics to set itself apart from the other fighters on the market. One such mechanic is Rush Mode, a temporary enhancement that allows for players' attacks and movements to be executed easier. The moves flow nicely from one attack to another, with the one-man developer Rarebreed saying he was inspired by the fluid animation of the classic Flash fight scenes depicted in famous Stick Fight videos. To counter Rush Mode's offensive onslaught, Blazing Strike also introduces new defensive measures that let players weather the storm based on block, guard, and parry approaches that can stun an attacker in Rush Mode. This means both the attacker and the defender need to be smart with their approaches when these systems are in play.

To further hammer home the fact that this is not only a new take on 2D fighting, but also a love letter to those early games, Rarebreed has completely reworked the visual style, which originally consisted of 3D models on a 2D plane. The graphics now use pixel art and are much more reminiscent of the classic fighters Rarebreed is modeling Blazing Strike after. The roster of playable characters currently sits at 10, with fighters ranging from a brawling tank wearing the skin of a tiger to a female character with a giant mechanical katana. With so much obvious love aimed toward the classics of the genre, Blazing Strike is one to keep an eye on for fans of retro 2D fighters. Hopefully the oft-delayed fighter will finally see the light of day in 2019.

GRANBLUE FANTASY VERSUS

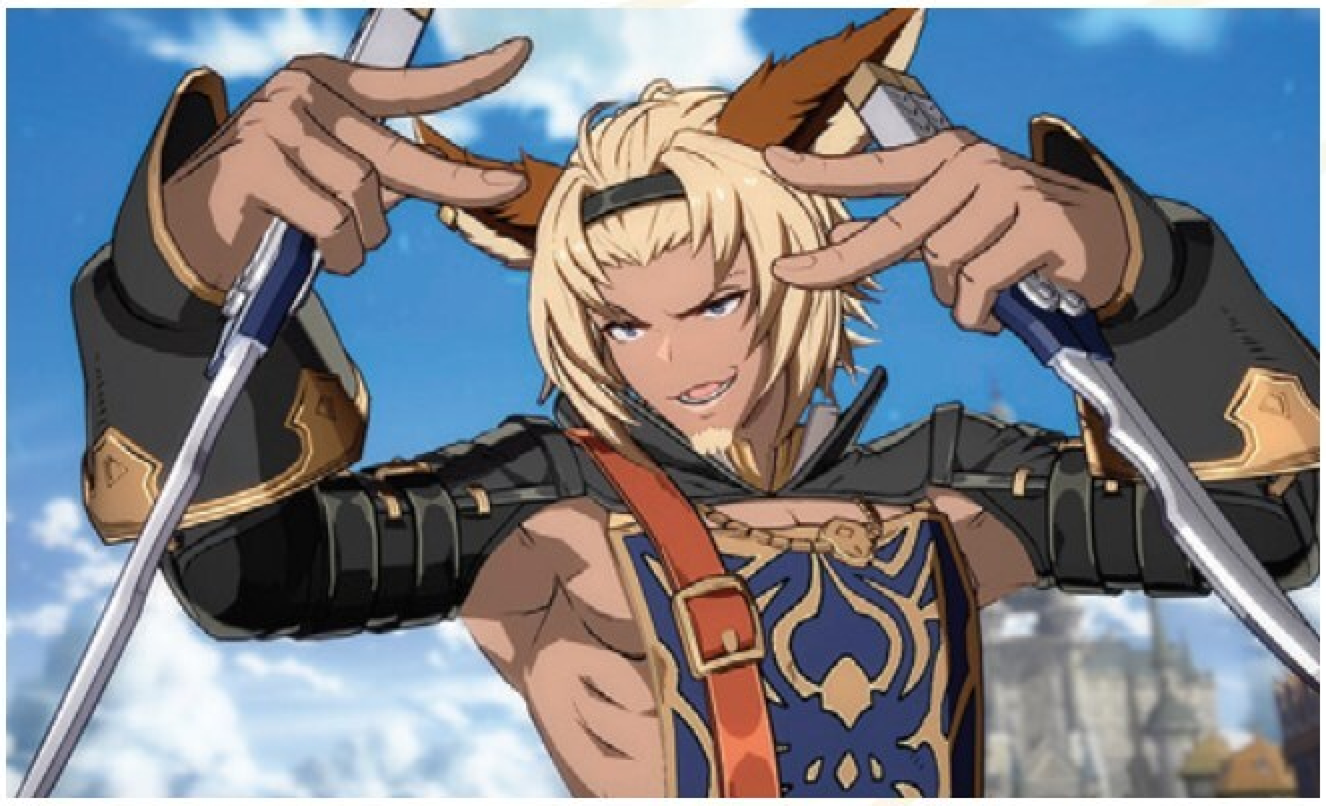
PLATFORM: PS4
RELEASE: 2019

Mobile RPG Granblue Fantasy is a big deal in Japan, currently boasting over 23 million users. Now it's ready to make its mark on North America by tackling the fighting genre, though it will launch a large-scale RPG at a later date. Cygames is teaming up with Arc System Works, the minds behind the hit series Guilty Gear and BlazBlue, to meld its gorgeous anime visuals with some flashy and powerful movesets.

The roster includes 10 characters from the mobile darling that inspired it, such as namesake Gran and master swordsman Lancelot. Recently, the team pulled back the curtain on one of its more zany fighters: Lowain. The free-spirited soul has plenty of tricks up his sleeve thanks to his two equally mischievous buddies at his side, making for a unique fighting style that mixes quick dagger attacks with some silly antics in between thanks to a little help from his two pals.

During a fight, Lowain calls on his friends who can do everything from throw his enemies to carry him around so he can deliver some devastating blows. Lowain can also summon a half-human, half-robot to blast through enemies with her laser eyes. True to the mobile game, where he was a chef on Gran's crew, Lowain also uses his cooking abilities to serve up cuisines, which most likely heal or buff him.

As seen with Lowain, Granblue Versus isn't shying away from incorporating elements from the original RPG, including story beats and abilities that encompass each character's personality. Details are still slim outside of the character reveals, but so far the fighter looks promising, and you can't deny the gorgeous visuals.



CEREBRAWL

PLATFORM: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
RELEASE: TBD

While most fighting games are centered on two players duking it out, Zero Dimension's Cerebrawl takes a different approach and is influenced by the likes of Marvel vs. Capcom 2 and Street Fighter III: Third Strike. This 2v2 fighter puts emphasis on communication with your team member, as you tactically figure out the best approach to collaboratively defeat the opponents.

"We're not trying to pretend that other fighting games haven't done something similar, but 4-player systems that exist have been tacked onto 1v1 games, which ultimately feels like a novelty and doesn't tend to achieve real competitive gameplay," says Zero Dimension co-founder and producer Aaron Oak.

If you'd prefer a single-player experience, Cerebrawl also offers 1v1 and 1v2 modes. However, in 2v2 fights, you can tag in your teammate or call an assist if you're in need of aid. You coordinate with your partner to maximize combos or hop in and out of the battle with a short combo to help them.

"A big part of what drives our design is taking players out of a standard solo experience and placing them in a team, where they not only need to figure out what their character composition looks like, but also what core teamplay might look like such as communicating tags and combos between players," Oak says.

Cerebrawl takes place in a modern metropolis that was forever changed by an "Imagination Bomb" that was detonated at the city's center. This created multiple dimensions and inhabitants' psyches to collide. As for its environments, the stages can extend and shorten depending on the destruction of your surroundings, like breaking a wall or busting the floor.

Zero Dimension hasn't yet nailed down a release date as it is still looking for a publisher, but for a minimum donation you can download the prototype from their official website or pick up the demo from itch.io.

FANTASY STRIKE

PLATFORM: PS4 • Switch • PC
RELEASE: 2019

There is a common consensus among the fighting game community's most elite players that before combos and frame data, the first thing newbie players need to learn is the fundamentals of the genre. That is the concept behind Fantasy Strike, an upcoming fighting game by Sirlin Games, which emphasizes the chess-like attributes of playing fighting games over the barrier of execution that prevents players from getting good.

The developer is headed by David Sirlin, a longtime professional fighting game player turned game designer. Sirlin is fixated on the concept of Yomi, a Japanese term for reading your opponent's mind, and designed Fantasy Strike around that idea. The game assigns all the moves to buttons, including specials, supers, and throws. It is then up to players to figure out when the best time to use a move should be without worrying about whiffing the inputs. To counter throws, players simply avoid pressing anything, adding a zen-like quality of anticipating an opponent's moves.

Fantasy Strike's vibrant-but-simple graphics are welcoming, without having more going on than can be comprehended at once. The roster, which is primarily based on fantasy fiction tropes like ninjas and steampunk engineers, are based around different primary colors so it is difficult to lose track of which character is which in the heat of battle. Health bars are also broken up into the number of hits an opponent can take.

The veterans of the fighting game community recall a time when everyone in the world could pick up a game of Street Fighter II, before the genre earned itself a reputation for being too complicated by the mass audience. Sirlin wants to bring back that accessibility and Fantasy Strike looks to be a promising leap into that idea. ◆

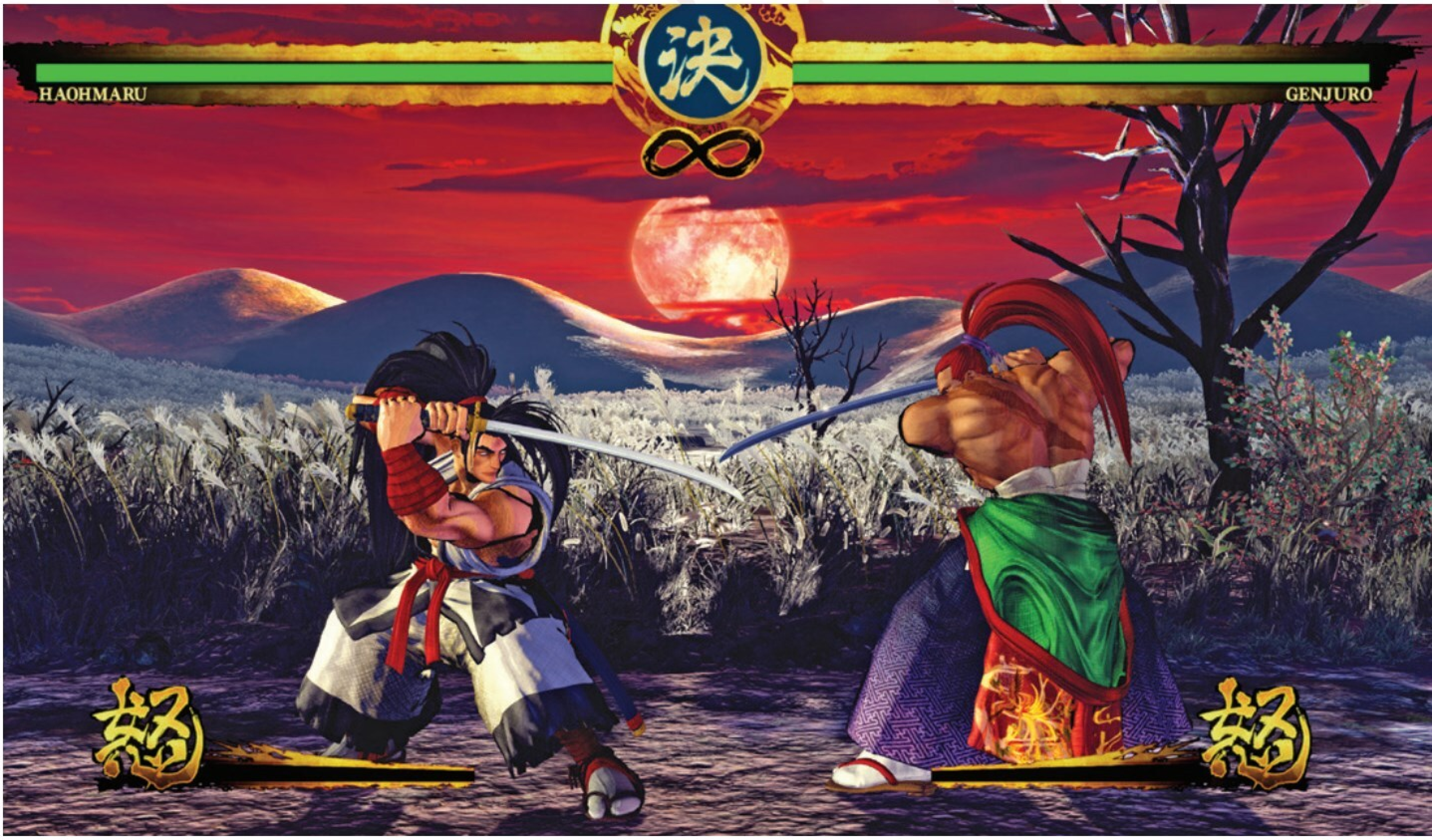
» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» STYLE
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(2-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
SNK Corporation

» DEVELOPER
SNK Corporation

» RELEASE
June,
Winter (Switch),
TBA (PC)



NAKORURU
EARTHQUAKE
超

UNSHEATHING THE SWORD

A reboot of Samurai Shodown comes at a time when SNK itself is returning to its roots. In 2015, after being purchased by Chinese company Ledo Millenium for its slew of classic series like The King of Fighters, Metal Slug, and Samurai Shodown, SNK announced it would move away from the pachinko parlor slot machines that had come to define it for the last ten years and focus on better selling its stable of franchises through other media, Marvel Cinematic Universe-style. This meant making fighting games for the first time in five years.

To do this, SNK hired back some of the people who helped create some of its earliest titles, including Yasuyuki Oda and Nobuyuki Koroki, the designer and artist behind the Art of Fighting and Fatal Fury series, respectively. The first fruit of this initiative was the return of SNK's premiere fighting franchise with The King of Fighters XIV, which was praised by fans for its intricate fighting systems and wealth of new characters.

Samurai Shodown is built with the same engine that made The King of Fighters XIV (now adapted to Unreal Engine 4), and you can spot both the similarities and differences immediately. As in The King of Fighters XIV, each of Samurai Shodown's characters sport evocative, fluid animations.

The reboot is set in 1788 Japan, placing it after Samurai Shodown V but before the first entry. A traditional Japanese aesthetic inspired by art from the Edo period runs through the game; the wind trails of sword swipes recall paint brush strokes, and characters carry a manga paper-coated texture to them. When struck, characters spray a bit of blood, which coats their bodies and the floor for a few seconds. Special and super attacks also have appropriately flashy effects layered on top of them, and do a great job of selling those moves' power.

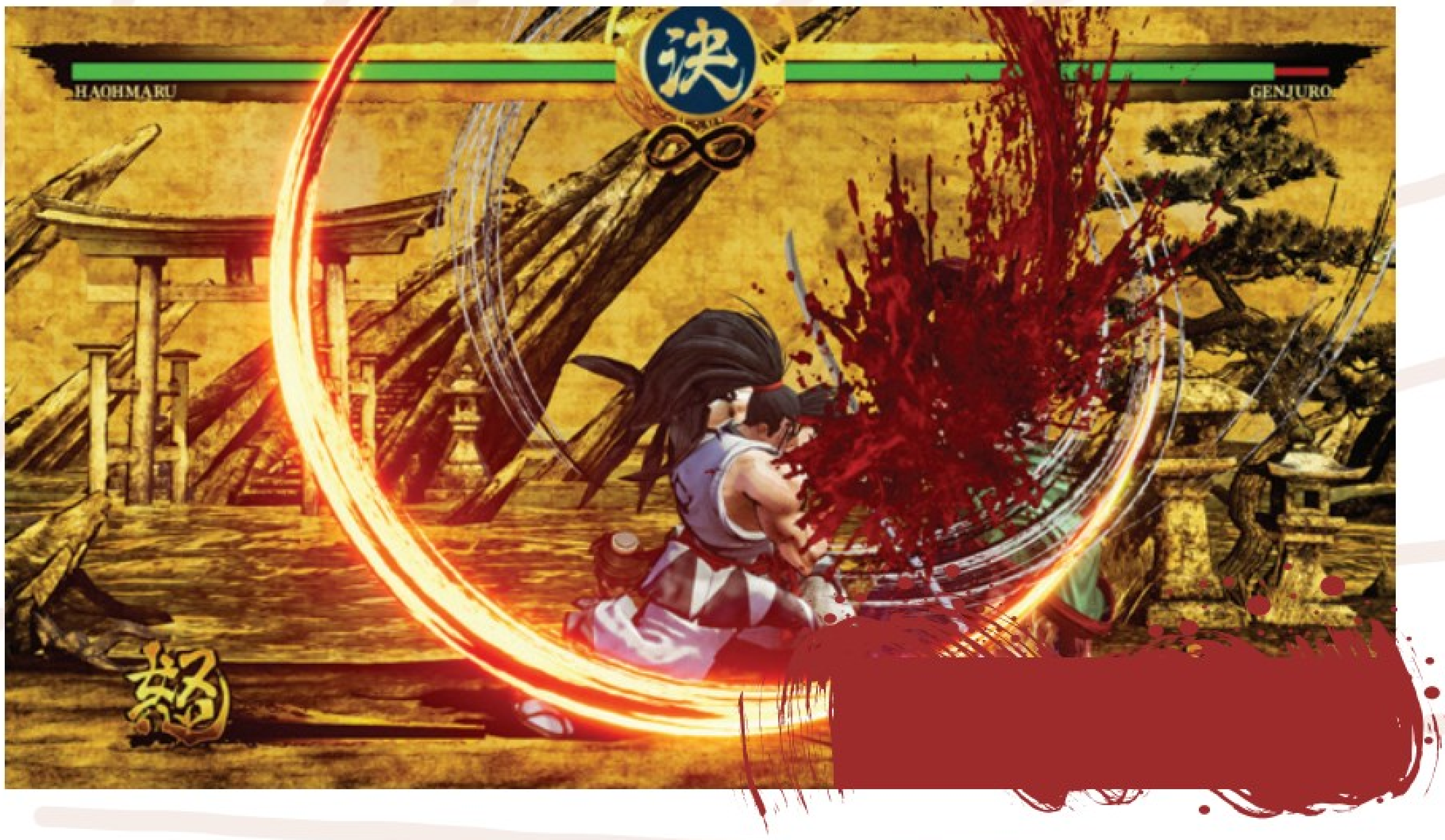
Its gameplay, meanwhile, is reminiscent of Samurai Shodown II, the game which popularized the series and still remains an intense, approachable fighting game (check out where it places on our ranking of the greatest fighting games of all time on page 46). While over-the-top special moves still factor in, players rely mostly on light, medium, or heavy slashes as well as a kick attack to wear down their opponents. A well-placed heavy attack can lop off a fourth of a health bar, making every move count.

Like any good fighting game, however, it requires more than poking and prodding at your opponent. Beating your opponent's attack with your own causes you to deal more damage, making attacks even more deadly. Dodging allows you to evade attacks entirely and leave your opponent vulnerable, though abusing them could leave you defenseless instead.

You can also deflect attacks, which forces the opponent to recoil, giving you a slight advantage. Deflect a heavy slash and you disarm your opponent, leaving them unable to attack with their sword until they retrieve it. Finally, if you block at the exact right moment, you will recover from it more quickly, letting you punish otherwise safe attacks.

The series-staple rage meter also returns, filling up as you take damage, but also providing you with a few different options. While it's full, your attack power increases and you

GALFORD
HAOHMARU


HAOHMARU
GENJURO

NAKORURU

DARLI
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SEEKING NEW OPPONENTS

While much of Samurai Shodown is planted in tradition, SNK is branching out in at least one interesting direction: computer opponents. While the game's arcade and survival single-player modes will use traditional A.I. (Weatherford says the game's boss character is "one of the easier SNK bosses, but it's still an SNK boss," alluding to the company's penchant for unrelentingly difficult and input-reading final opponents), the dojo mode doesn't.

Instead, it employs technology relatively new to fighting games. As you play its single-player offline modes, the game slowly builds a "ghost" of your playstyle with a particular character, recording what moves you make in certain situations. You can then upload that ghost to dojo mode, where your friends and others can play against it. This acts, effectively, as a sort of asynchronous multiplayer mode for fighting games.

Weatherford is helping spearhead the effort behind the dojo mode A.I., which he helped build due to how many people approach modern fighting games. "One thing you realize is that a lot of people don't play online," he says. "You can look at trophy data, and some of the simpler trophies, like 'complete five matches online,' usually have a 20-percent rating or something, as far as completion goes. So part of the idea is to give them something to play for a long time that doesn't have the same psychological factor of fighting an actual, real-life opponent."

The tech isn't completely new, as the 2013 Killer Instinct reboot experimented with a similar concept, but it'll be interesting to see how SNK implements and builds on the idea. If it catches on, it could potentially open the door to more modes and games that take advantage of similar tech, making playing fighting games by yourself a lot more enticing. "A.I.'s never gotten that much different [in fighting games], it's the one thing that's always pushed to the wayside, because you can't make a flashy trailer about A.I." Weatherford says. "I've always personally wanted to do something related to that, so I'm really looking forward to seeing what happens with it."

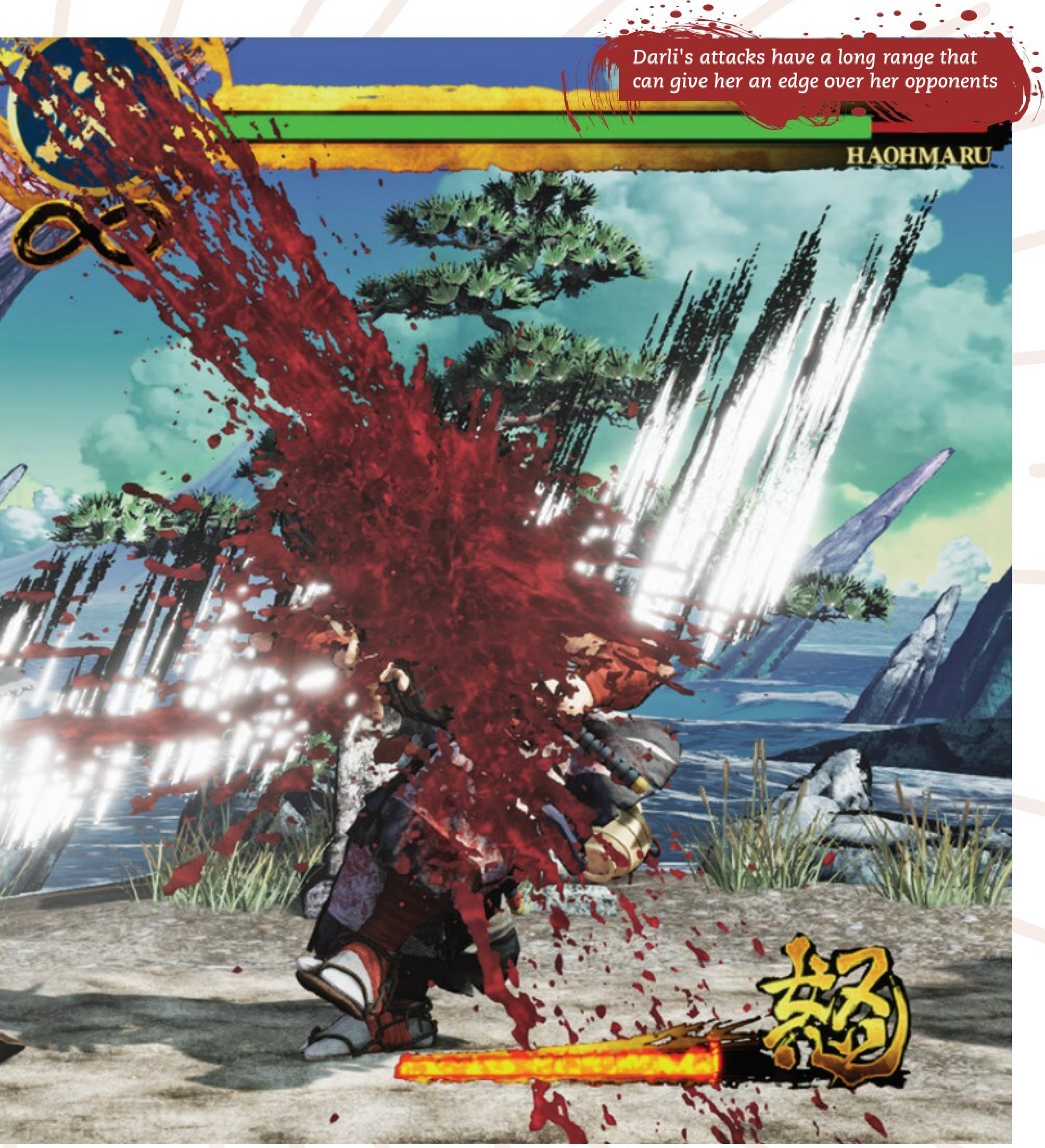
A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES

Along with the dojo mode, Samurai Shodown has a few other ways to play that may alleviate some of the performance anxiety players may face online. A five-on-five elimination spreads out the responsibility to a team, placing less of a focus on individual players. Finally, an "Iron Man challenge" mode pits you against 100 player-made ghosts characters to see how far can get. Of course, you also have the option to duke it out with other players online.

Overall, however, Samurai Shodown is a fairly modest release in the fighting game space. Its story mode is fairly traditional and more akin to a classic arcade mode, albeit with a light layer of dialogue and story snippets throughout. That's to be expected; it's currently being developed by around 50 people, around half of SNK's 110-strong workforce, which is also focused on its mobile and burgeoning esports division, which manages a tournament league for The King of Fighters, as well as the recent Neo Geo World Tour.

Samurai Shodown is just one part of the plan for SNK. The company has already announced it is working on another King of Fighters game, and it's likely more consideration is going into reviving other classic franchises with SNK's new focus. But in the meantime, Samurai Shodown looks to offer something different in the modern day fighting landscape simply by reinforcing what made it such a groundbreaking series in the first place: the tension that a single blow can wield when the stakes are so high. ◆

To see Samurai Shodown in action, check out our episode of New Gameplay Today at gameinformer.com


Darli's attacks have a long range that can give her an edge over her opponents

CHARLOTTE
JUBE

Pokémon Sword And Shield

A new generation on Switch

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo,
The Pokémon Company

» **Developer**
Game Freak

» **Release**
2019

Since the series debuted more than two decades ago, Pokémon has existed almost exclusively on handheld devices, with only spin-offs making the leap to consoles. That changed with last year's Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu and Let's Go, Eevee, but those were simply modern remakes of older titles. The newly revealed Pokémon Sword and Shield represent the next step in the series' evolution, as developer Game Freak is creating a new generation of Pokémon and an all-new region for players to explore.

In Pokémon Sword and Shield, players explore the Galar region. Here you can expect diverse locales, ranging from picturesque farmlands and small towns in the south to sprawling cities and snow-capped mountains up north. The map has a longitudinal orientation, with players likely starting in the south and working their way toward what appears to be a technologically advanced city at the northernmost point.

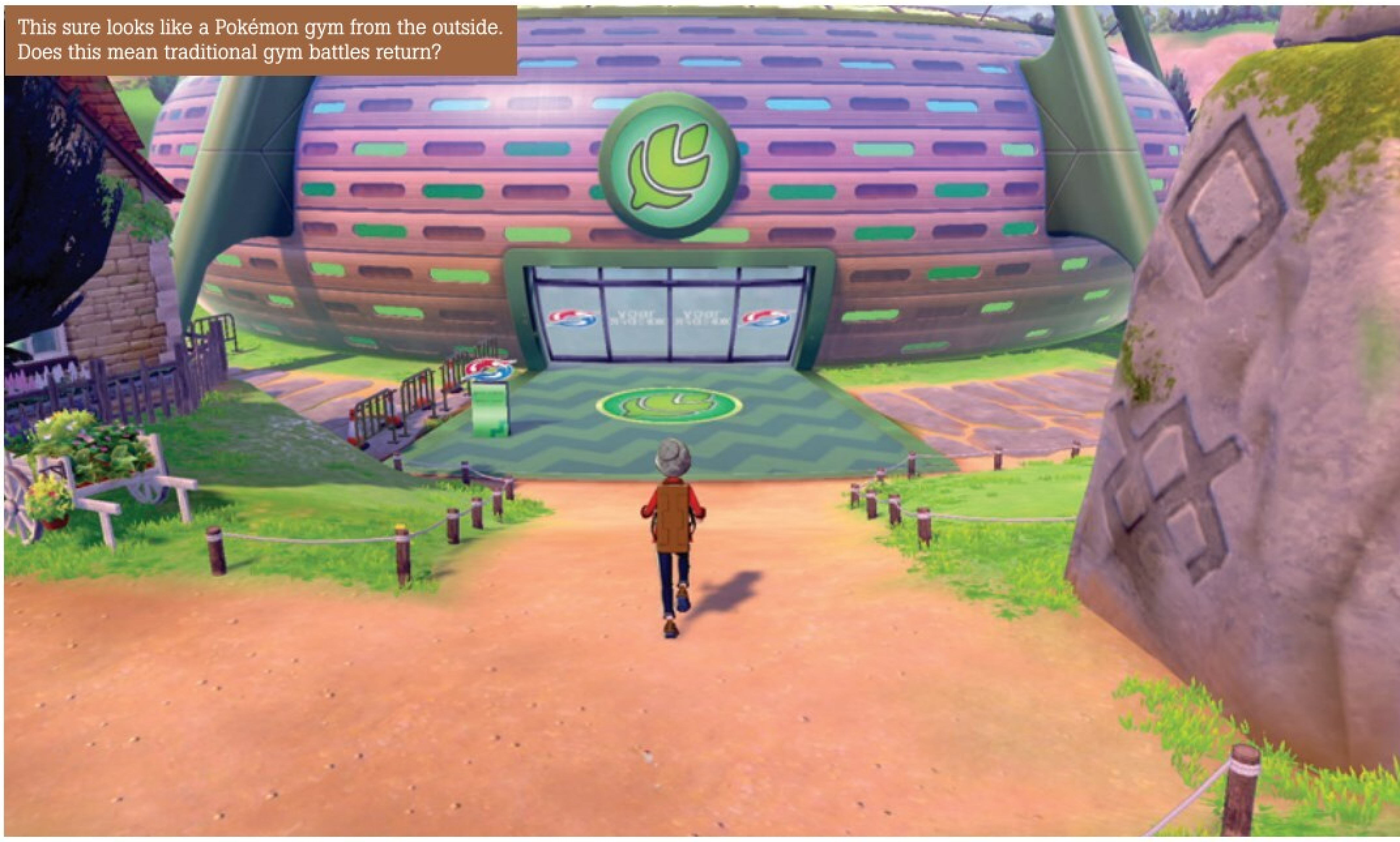
As usual, players have a choice between three starter Pokémon, with the standard grass, fire, and water types represented. Grass-type Grookey is described as mischievous and curious. Scorbunny, the fire-type starter, is energetic and looks like a troublemaker. Sobble, the water-type, is a timid lizard that appears to turn invisible. We don't know much else about these starters, but they are just the beginning of an entirely new generation of creatures to collect.

Of course, in addition to the new Pokémon, players can catch and battle a variety of monsters from past generations. A wide range of past-gen Pokémon make appearances in the debut gameplay footage, including Pikachu, Lucario, Tyranitar, Zweilous, Rowlet, and Wishiwashi. We're not yet sure if this means they are in the wild for you to catch, or just that other trainers use them in battle, but you can expect to see them in action one way or the other.

Battles appear to work much in the same way as they have the entire series; if you walk in the sightline of other trainers, they approach you for a battle. As expected, the animations look better than ever, providing a showcase for what the added horsepower of the Switch can do for the

traditionally handheld series. However, while the environments look good and the battle animations look improved, we're hoping for more moments that truly show this as the next visual evolution for the series.

The reveal trailer also features a sequence where a character wearing an official uniform is walking into a stadium. The uniform the character is wearing features the same logo that appears earlier in the trailer outside of what looks like a Pokémon gym. We don't know if these are official tournaments that take place within the story, bringing new meaning to the term "Pokémon League," or if this hints at a special arena for multiplayer battles. Either way, it will be interesting to see if this arena setting borrows anything from spin-off console games like Pokémon Stadium and Pokémon Battle Revolution, with elements like reactive crowds and play-by-play commentary.

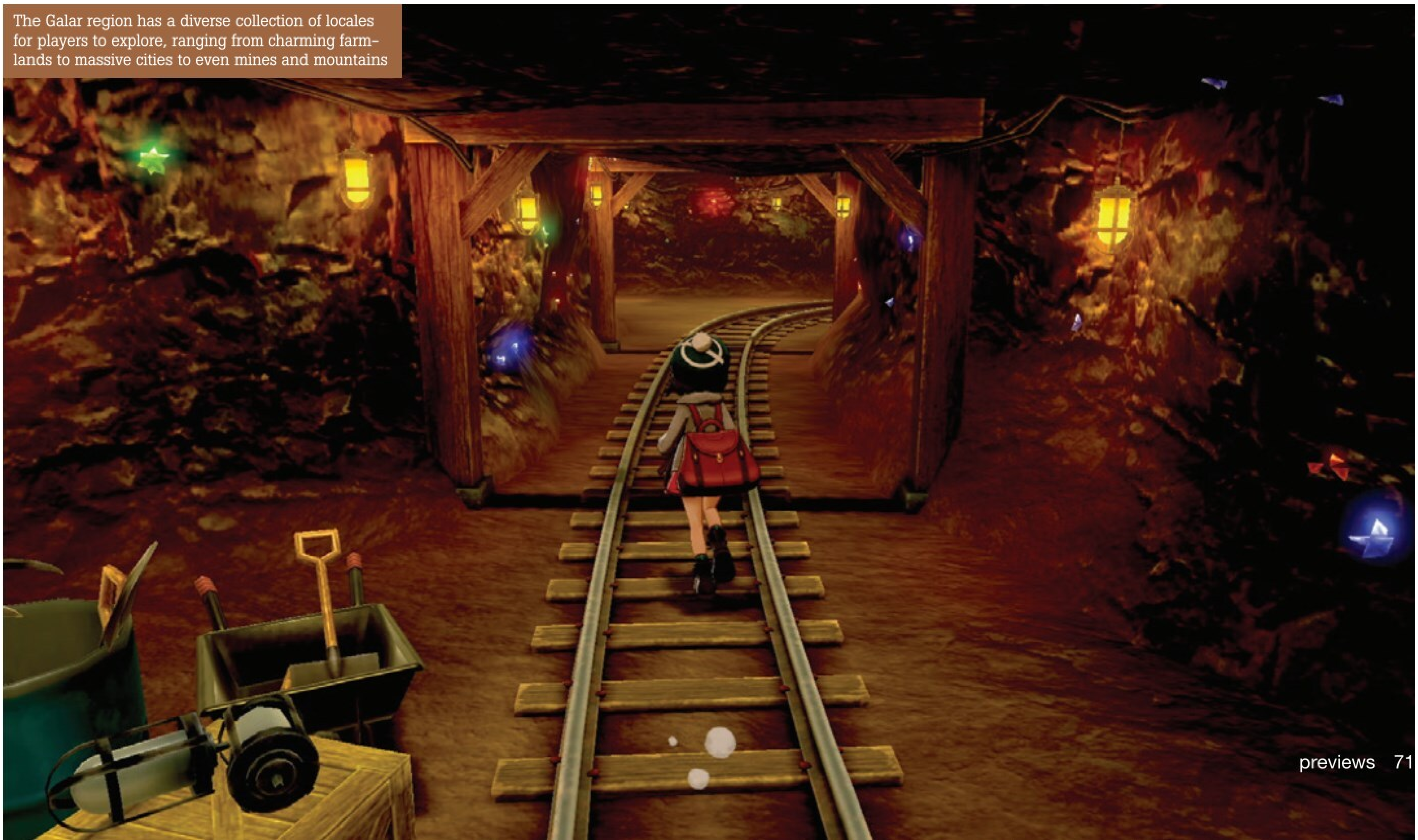

This sure looks like a Pokémon gym from the outside. Does this mean traditional gym battles return?

Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu and Eevee made several tweaks to the traditional formula, removing random encounters and the requirement to weaken the wild Pokémon before you catch them. We don't yet definitively know how wild encounters work in Sword and Shield, but a brief gameplay snippet shows a trainer sneaking around in tall grass when a Pikachu suddenly appears. While it's impossible to know if that Pikachu was spawned in the tall grass and we just couldn't see it, the sequence appears to suggest random encounters are back. Additionally, instead of just throwing a ball at the wild Pokémon and hoping for the best as you would in Let's Go, the trainer engages the Pikachu in battle, signaling that traditional, battle-based encounters are probably also returning.

Other small tidbits throughout the trailer include the ability to choose between a male or female trainer, and unique weather in certain areas including a forest full of fog and snow falling as you run through the craggy mountain. The trailer also emphasizes a train, which could hint at a method of transportation like we've seen in past Pokémon games.

Despite all this information, we still have a lot of questions. Do traditional gym battles return after Sun and Moon replaced them with more amorphous island challenges? Will players be able to bring Pokémon they caught in the past games forward through the Pokémon Bank or a similar app? Will Sword and Shield retain some of the conventions established in the Let's Go games like drop-in co-op play or Pokémon Go connectivity? Are Meltan and Melmetal (recent additions to Pokémon Go) part of this new generation?

At this time, we don't know the answers to any of these questions, or even how Sword and Shield might differ from one another. However, with several months still to go between now and release in late 2019, we have plenty of time to learn more about this new frontier. » **Brian Shea**


The Galar region has a diverse collection of locales for players to explore, ranging from charming farmlands to massive cities to even mines and mountains

Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2

A long-sought sequel comes out of the coffin

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Paradox Interactive

» Developer
Hardsuit Labs

» Release
2020

Back in 2004, Troika Games debuted an uncut diamond with Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines, a moody, choice-driven role-playing game set in the White Wolf pencil-and-paper universe. It released in a state of disrepair not unlike an energy-drained vampire desperate for blood, but dedicated fans glamoured by its atmospheric world and unique premise gave it new life, rounding out the rough edges and even restoring scrapped content through mods. Bloodline's reputation continued to grow while the franchise collected dust inside a coffin, but now it's primed to emerge from the shadows.

With Troika long since disbanded, franchise rights owner Paradox Interactive handed the resurrection duties to Hardsuit Labs, which includes Bloodlines writer Brian Mitsoda among its ranks. This makes the studio well-suited to handle the delicate work of updating the series with new hooks while maintaining the elements that earned its original loyal fans.

Rather than pick up where the previous game left off 15 years ago, Hardsuit instead chose to tell a new tale set in the city of Seattle. With its pervasive cloud cover, unceasing rain storms, and vibrant nightlife, it's a perfect city for bloodsuckers to take up residency. The setting may be new to video games, but the politics among the various vampiric clans should be familiar to anyone who played the first release.

The story follows an innocent protagonist swept up into this supernatural subculture when a group of vampires go rogue and illicitly perform a Mass Embrace, descending on a bunch of pedestrians in Pioneer Square in the middle of the night and converting them into vampires. This action goes against the vampiric code, so the Camarilla wants to hunt down these "thinbloods" to learn what happened and put them out of their misery. As one of these targets, you must evade capture and navigate the faction wars to learn who turned you into a vampire and why.

The world of Bloodlines 2 operates much like the original, with certain parts of the city and its outskirts operating as hubs ripe for exploration and story missions. These spaces feature plenty of vertical spaces and alleys to keep your nefarious deeds in the

shadows, and even a series of underground passageways and basements that were actually the ground level of the city in the mid-19th century before the Great Seattle Fire swept through and the city planners decided to build on top of the ruins.

As a fledgling vampire, you start off with a small suite of supernatural powers. Activating your heightened senses highlights points of interest like the investigation mode in the Batman: Arkham games, which is also helpful for identifying prey when it's feeding time. Depending on the choices you make, you can also learn how to levitate and glide through the air, control bats, manipulate objects with your mind, or even turn into a mist cloud to move through pipes to new areas. You don't start as a member of any particular vampire clan, but as the story plays out you can align yourself with certain factions and even learn new vampire powers from them. Make certain decisions, however, and you may alienate another clan and cut off an entire progression path.

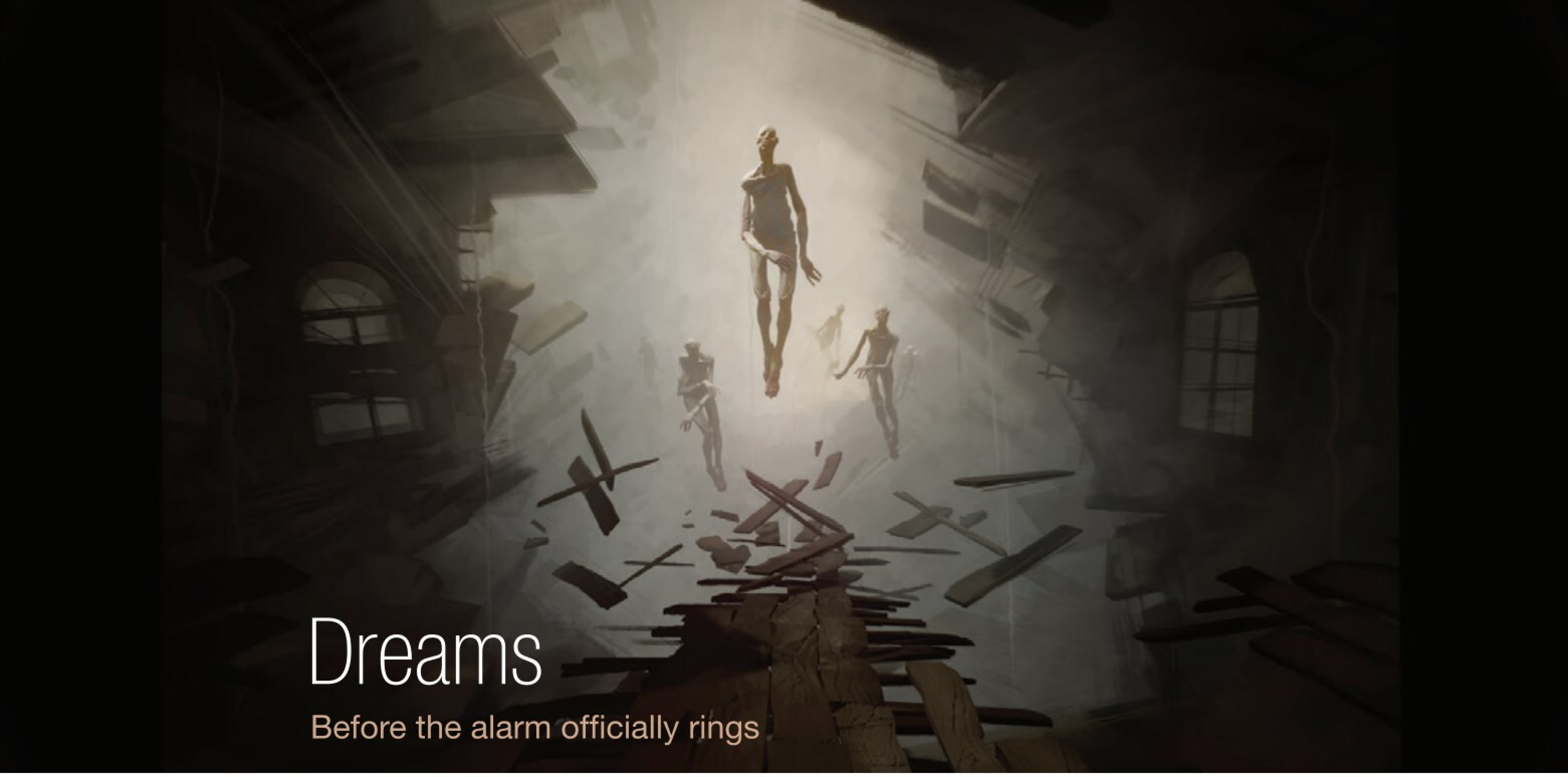
Vampires are formidable predators, and this prowess is on display during first-person combat sequences. Many of the skirmishes are focused on hand-to-hand combat, with players taking advantage of their supernatural agility to dodge incoming attacks and close the gap between them and their opponent quickly. Guns are occasionally interjected into the mix, but most of the time you're relying on your supernatural gifts to survive these scraps. During our demo we saw the player pull off several impressive feats, like running up a wall to pounce on an enemy from above.

You can always choose to cap off your fights by feasting on the weak, but you need to be careful about how much blood you drink at any given time. If you mortally wound a person during feeding you can take on other accruing affects like madness. Over time, you could eventually compromise your humanity and make your hunger more uncontrollable. Going down this beastly path will also have implications for your dialogue choices.

After years of thinking a Bloodlines sequel was an unrequited dream, it's nice to see the franchise finally get a follow-up. We hope to learn a great deal more about how Hardsuit Labs hopes to live up to its legacy in the coming months. » **Matt Bertz**

Embracing Mods

Paradox Interactive and Hardsuit Labs are well aware the mod community played a critical role in fixing up the original Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines. To honor that legacy and reward their steadfast loyalty, Bloodlines 2 will support modding from day one.



Dreams

Before the alarm officially rings

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1 to 4-Player Compilation (4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
Media Molecule

» Release
April 16 (Early Access)

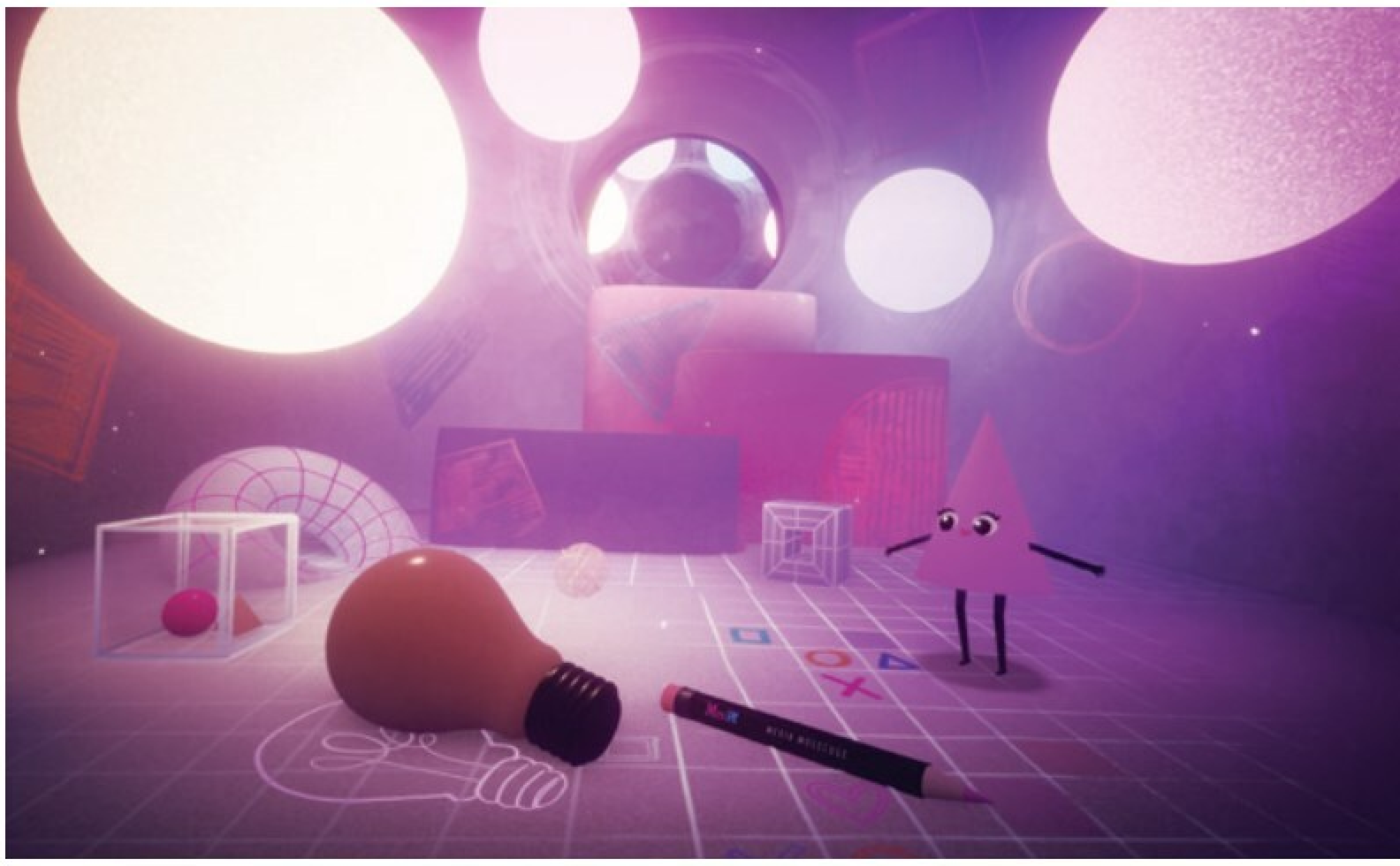
The biggest question players had about Dreams when it was revealed in 2013 was, "What is this thing?" Continued coverage of the game (including our November 2018 cover story) and a beta have all helped us finally appreciate exactly what Dreams is, which led to a few follow-up questions: When can we play the full version of Dreams, and how much will it cost?

Media Molecule recently answered those questions, but with an asterisk. Dreams' Creator Early Access releases this spring, and costs $29.99. This Early Access version, which is a first for a Sony first-party game, features all of Dreams' creation tools, tutorials on how to use them, and the content that was created by "dreamers" during the beta. It does not include the single-player campaign, and it is generally light on levels created by Media Molecule.

"Early Access is for creators who want to be part of the Dreams experience from the beginning," writes Media Molecule studio director Siobhan Reddy on the PlayStation Blog. "People who will create, play others' creations, get involved in the social features of Dreams and give us feedback." Basically, this is an opportunity to get into creation early and get your hands on the tools. For those interested in Dreams strictly as a curated experience, this might not be the right point for you to jump in.

Those creation tools, which we played around with during the beta, are dense and have nearly unlimited potential. They're intimidating, but the tutorials are well-made, interesting, and genuinely educational. They function like YouTube videos that rest in the foreground of your creation, walking you through specific tasks and letting you easily rewind and pause as necessary. You can tackle them in any order you want, which means if you only want to use Dreams to make music, you can just look at the music tutorials. If you want to make animations, you can skip the video on how to make platforms. If you're focused on one thing, you won't have to view any prerequisites, but going through all of the tutorials is the best way to understand how everything connects.

Our time with the beta impressed us tremendously, but not for what the tools allowed us to do. Rather, it was what other Dreams players were able to make in a matter of days. We saw expected things, like remakes of familiar franchise like Zelda and Mario, but we also saw mind-blowing original creations that covered distinct genres like adventure games and first-person shooters. We're excited to see what the experts at Media Molecule ship with the final version of the game, but more than anything else, we're excited to see what the community can create with unlimited access. **» Kyle Hilliard**



Harry Potter: Wizards Unite

Enter the wizarding world with your phone

Few properties on Earth have ingrained themselves into the social consciousness as thoroughly as the wizarding world of Harry Potter. After a series of best-selling books, blockbuster movies, spin-offs, and amusement parks, most people (children and adults) have at least heard of the bespectacled wizard and the secretive magical universe surrounding him. Now Niantic, fresh off developing the mobile hit Pokémon Go, is giving everyone a chance to live their own adventure as wizards and witches in their newest geolocation-based title, Harry Potter: Wizards Unite.

As a follow-up to Pokémon Go, Wizards Unite hews closely to its monster-based predecessor, following a number of the same goals and functions. The basic foundation of the two games is about using your phone in real-world locations that correlate with an augmented reality. This time around, as an agent of the International Statute of Secrecy Task Force, players make use of their own wands to investigate what has been dubbed "The Calamity." Different events, items, beasts, and people from the Harry Potter universe are spilling out into the world, and agents across the globe are tasked with dispelling them back to where they came from.

On a cold and cloudy day that feels like it could have been taken straight from one of the Harry Potter movies, Niantic took us out into the streets for a demonstration of how Wizards Unite works. Players search for traces, magical anomalies out of place in the real world, located somewhere on the map. For example, a shackled Demiguise might wait just outside the nearest landmark for someone to free it. In order to rout the confoundable magic that ensnared the creature, we had to trace a shape on the screen to cast one of the series' trademark spells. This opened the lock around the Demiguise's neck and let the fantastic beast escape.

Niantic wants Wizards Unite to bridge the gap between the more casual audience that went crazy over Pokémon Go and the more dedicated gamer audience that seeks a bit more depth in their gameplay and systems. The tip of this spear is the game's profession system, essentially job classes of magizoologist, professor, and auror. Each class has its own skill tree for offensive and defensive capabilities, so Niantic is hoping this will appeal to RPG fans seeking to build out their personal avatars a little bit more.

While built firmly on the foundations of the studio's previous work, Niantic assures that Wizards Unite will benefit from those extra years of experience to release something Harry Potter fans and gamers will enjoy together.

» **Imran Khan**

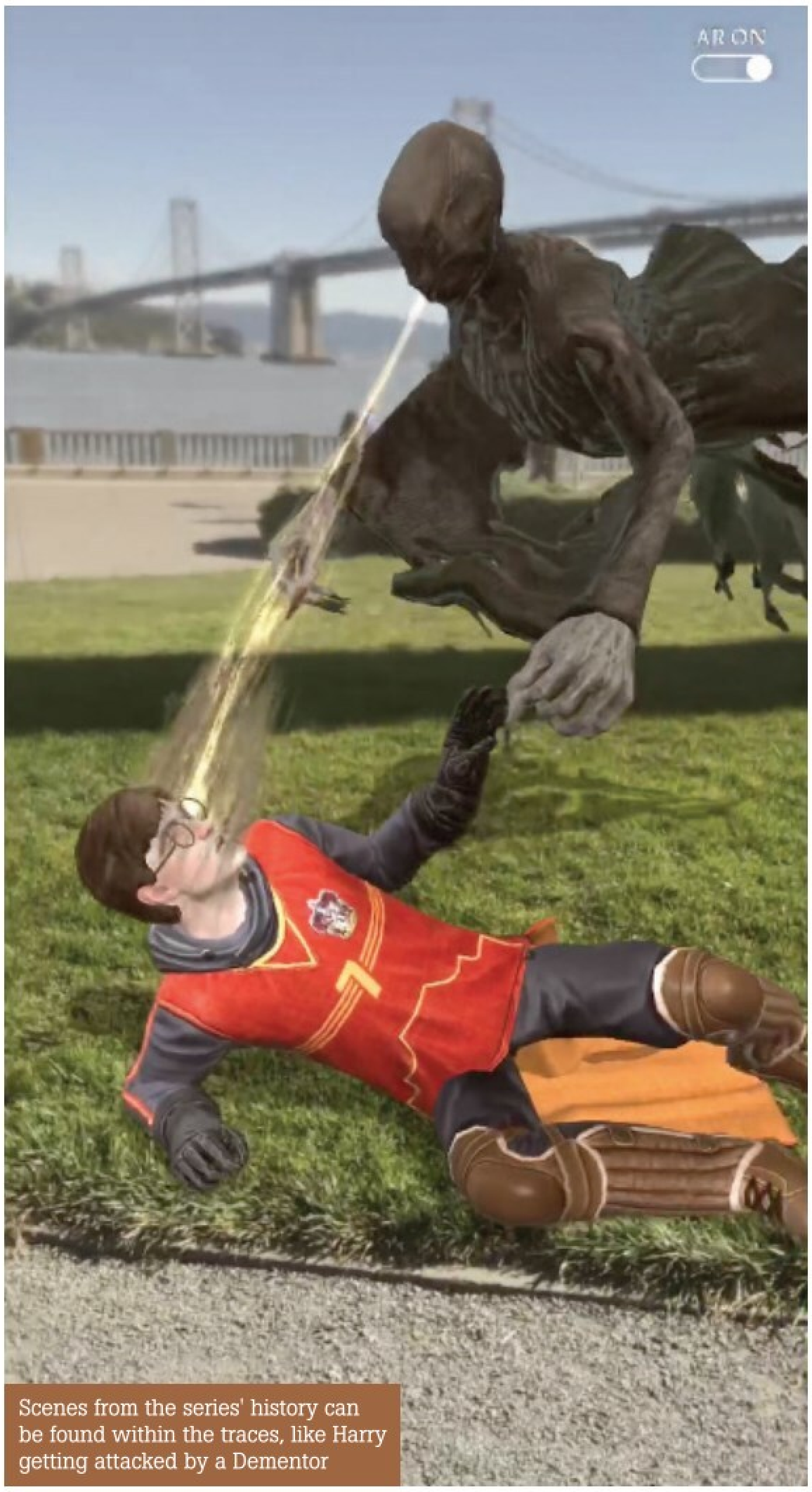
» **Platform**
iOS • Android

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
(5-Player Online)

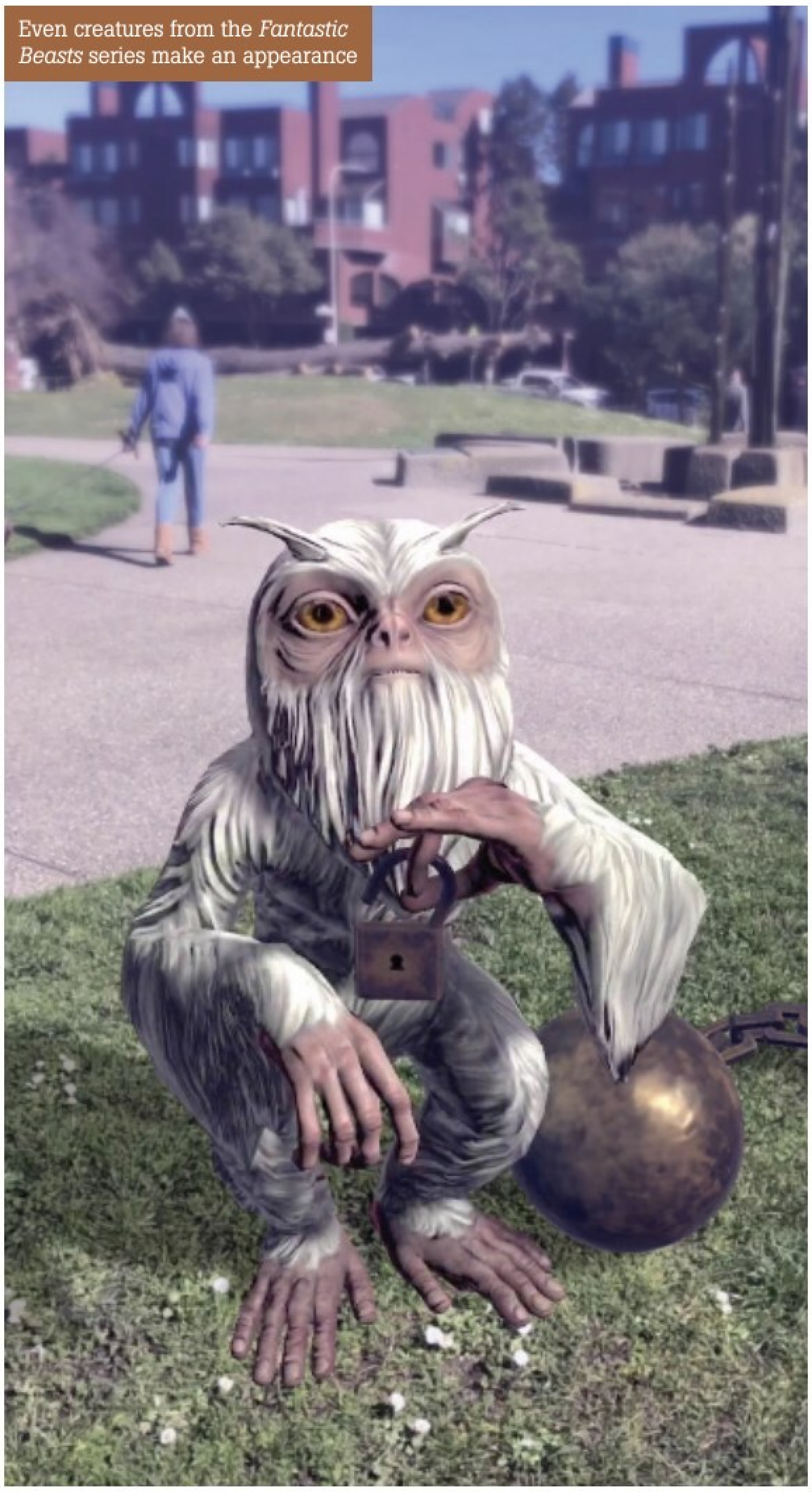
» **Publisher**
Niantic Labs

» **Developer**
Niantic Labs

» **Release**
2019



Scenes from the series' history can be found within the traces, like Harry getting attacked by a Dementor



Even creatures from the *Fantastic Beasts* series make an appearance

Rad

It's the end of the end of the world

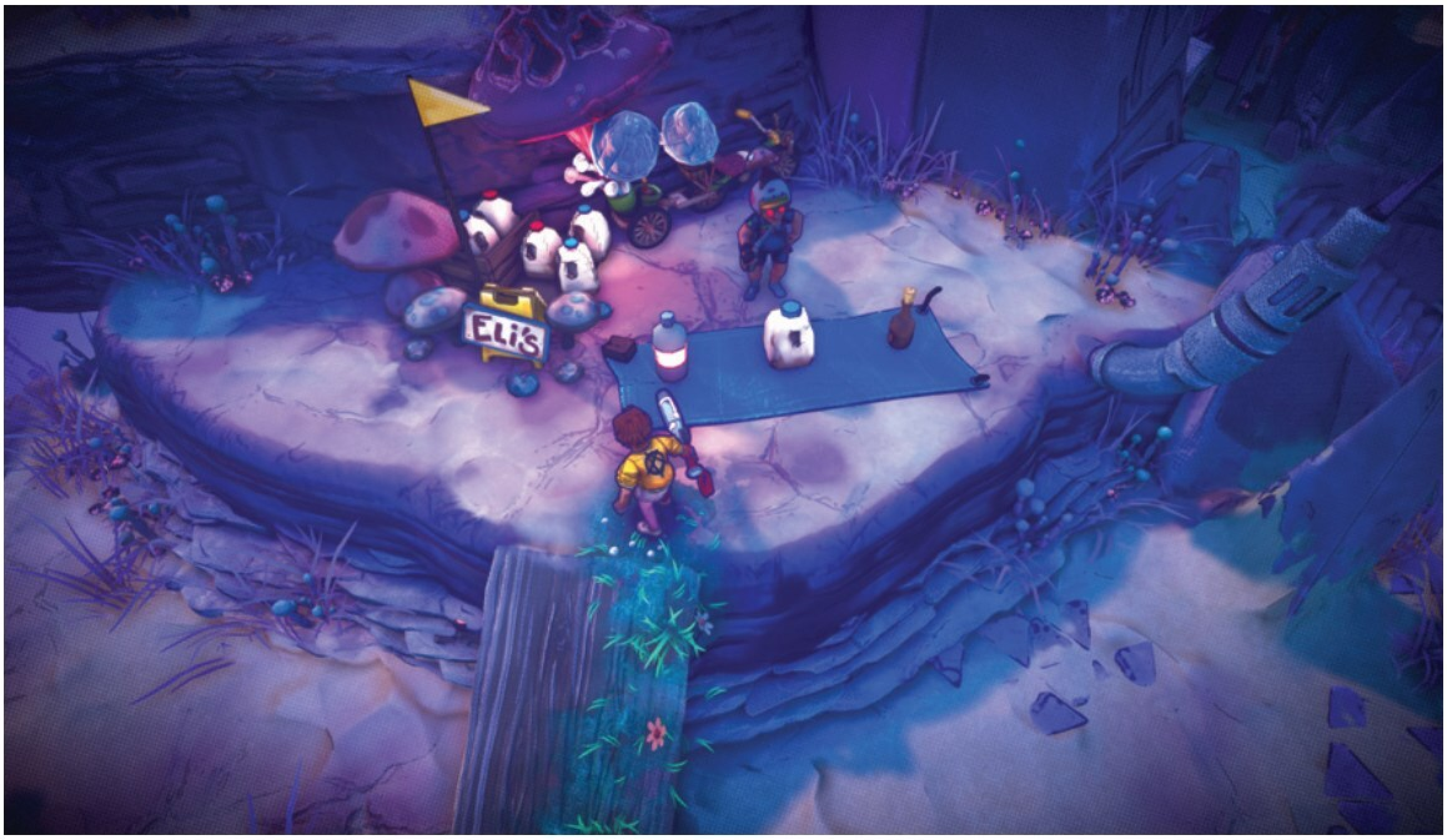
» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Bandai Namco

» Developer
Double Fine

» Release
Summer



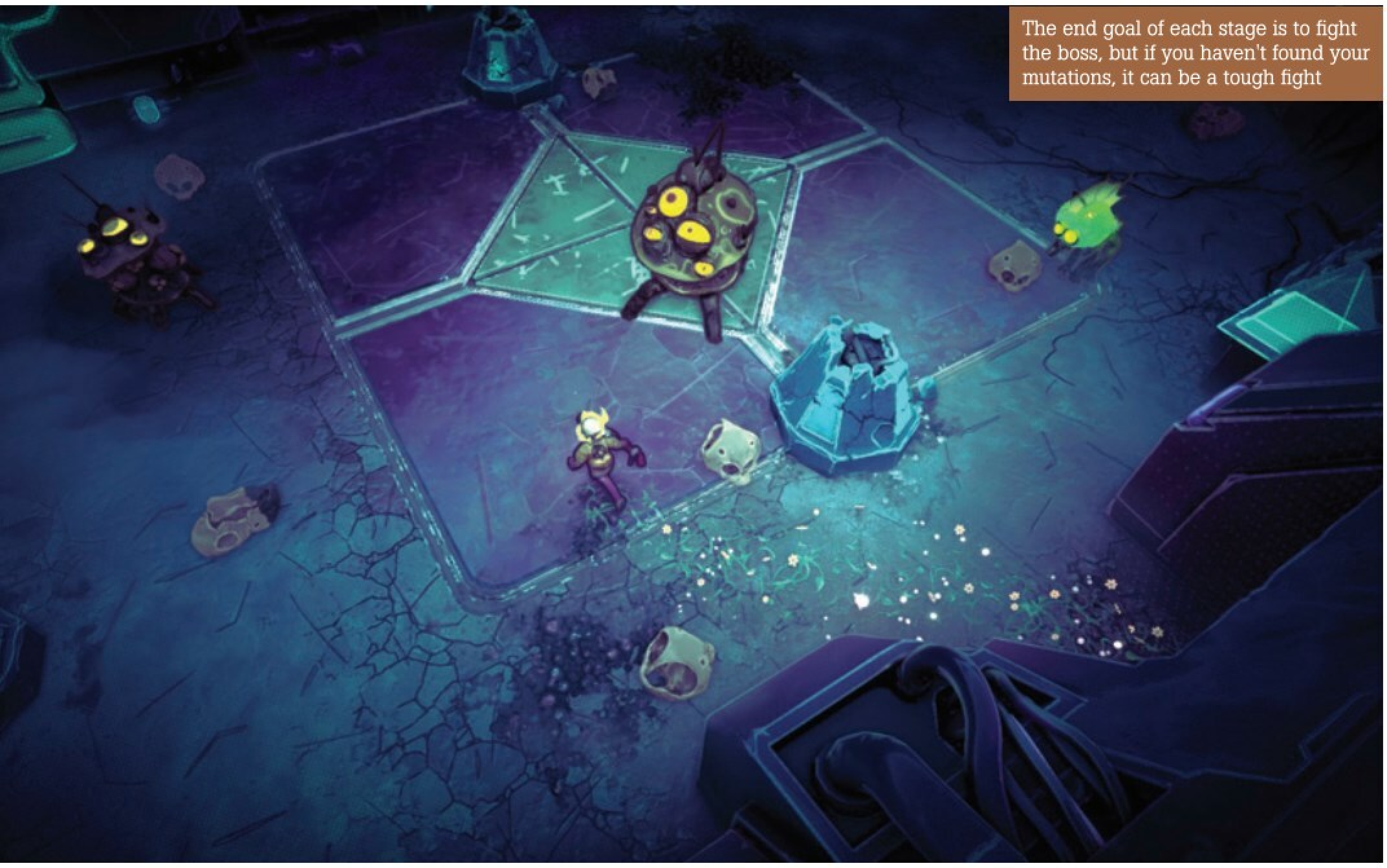
When developer Double Fine reinvented itself as a studio dedicated to pushing big ideas in smaller packages, the creators of games like Psychonauts, Broken Age, and Brütal Legend never backed down on letting its trademark personality shine through all its titles. With Rad, the newest game in the studio's large and diverse portfolio, Double Fine is once again looking to give its own charming and charismatic spin on an established genre with an action roguelike.

Rad takes place in a post-post-apocalypse; the world has ended twice already, leading to a basically unlivable and wretched lowland full of toxin and monsters. The remaining civilizations that exist in the few habitable areas are sending teenagers into the unsustainable lands to activate respirators and begin the process of healing the world. Those that agree to this quest undergo a genetic modification allowing them to create plant life as they walk and survive the deadly poison, but this reengineering of their DNA also makes them more susceptible to mutations. It turns out that might be a good thing.

The action takes place with the camera hanging above, letting players take a light dual-stick shooter approach to exploring and bashing in monster faces. Every so often, when a monster has been defeated, players receive a mutation that can aid them in battle. This might be a boomerang arm that flies off to damage foes, a cobra head that inflicts poison, or a cloud that causes every enemy to slow down around you. You get three random abilities assigned to buttons, but an unlimited number of passive ones.

Each run's mutations interact with each other in different ways, so players sometimes get a really useful set, and other times they draw the short straw. When the run is over, the mutations do not carry over to the next run, but the central hub of the starting village maintains money players deposited in the bank, as well as general upgrades to the baseball bat they wield.

Rad's aggressive '80s aesthetic feels like Mad Max with a punk-rock vibe. The title seems like a heavy metal band meets a Saturday morning cartoon, and it creates a unique aesthetic. Fans of games like Binding of Isaac or Dead Cells will probably find a lot to like about Rad's style and personality that differentiates it from those games, which is the hallmark of Double Fine's design. » **Imran Khan**



The end goal of each stage is to fight the boss, but if you haven't found your mutations, it can be a tough fight

GTFO

Victory through flexible firepower

Your group creeps down a roughly hewn tunnel, the path barely illuminated by flashlight beams. What's ahead? It's hard to say for certain. Perhaps an invisible creature, noticeable only by the shadows it casts. Maybe another twisted sentinel, blindly feeling its way through the darkness with an alarmingly large bloom of tendrils. Regardless of what form the danger takes, there are a few constants: Every bullet counts, and avoiding trouble altogether is usually the smarter play. Fortunately, you and your friends can change tactics – and the very nature of your arsenal – to adapt to this unknown nightmare.

GTFO is a cooperative, survival-horror shooter fiendishly engineered to keep players off balance and in formation. "The game is really designed around the cooperative elements," says game director, designer, and 10 Chambers Collective co-founder Ulf Andersson. "The reason we picked horror was not because we wanted to do scary s--- at first, but because it pushes the group together. If you play Left 4 Dead, the masterpiece that it is, when it's scary, that's when the team really gets pushed together and fights side by side and really starts to use the environment and talk about how you're going to beat [the zombies]. It has that flavor that we want to capture, but we want to go all the way with it."

One of the biggest ways 10 Chambers Collective increases the tension is by not letting players get too comfortable with the levels. Andersson and his team have developed tools that allow them to set parameters, generate new maps, and then polish them by hand to create what they're calling curated maps. These will rotate in on a regular basis, every month or two, with the existing maps getting tossed away forever. "You will never, ever see those maps again," he says. Maps are arranged in tiers, with players facing tougher challenges – and getting better rewards – for progressing further down the line.

A puzzle-like element is in play in these maps as well, which Andersson hopes will encourage the community to work together. Perhaps a tricky new level rewards players for sneaking around a densely inhabited chamber without waking any enemies. Or players could avoid a difficult fight by sealing a series of doors.

Weapon customization works with the maps in a complementary loop. GTFO doesn't have player classes; each player can select two weapons and a tool of their choosing along with them. Squads that don't plan ahead – or learn from past failures – and diversify face almost certain death. Weapons and tools can be replaced with newly found drops, but the interesting part comes from how they can be customized.

"Say I have a mine-deploying thing that lets me put mines on walls, and then I find a mapping device that fires off a flying drone – like in Prometheus – if I combine those, I can create a flying mine," Andersson says. Or you might have a sniper rifle and a sentry gun with a short barrel. If you take the barrel from the sniper rifle and put it on the sentry gun, you now have a longer-ranged sentry. "We see it as more of a golf bag, where you've got to be ready for whatever the game's going to throw you," Andersson says. The catch is, you destroy the parts that you don't use, so the rest of that sniper rifle is scrapped when you take the barrel.

Andersson says players have become accustomed to getting showered with items, which is where GTFO differs. He wants players to be forced to make tough choices, but to have those decisions feel like they're meaningful. "It's a different approach to how drops usually work," he says. "Nowadays, people just get bombarded with drops. We're going to flip it so there's not a lot of actual drops, but you can customize a lot more and it will actually modify the gameplay."

Since you're not alone, your customized creations and other tools can work with your teammates' gear to create powerful combined effects in battle. The glue gun that's used to seal doors can also coat the floors, slowing down larger enemies and stopping smaller ones altogether. That in turn can give your squad more time to connect their shots or make a retreat.

Andersson and his team have a lot of ambitious plans for GTFO, including a long plan for post-release updates that will explore a larger narrative about why prisoners are being sent down in the first place. For the time being, all you need to know is that you don't want to linger in the dark any longer than necessary, and a lone wolf is a dead wolf. » **Jeff Cork**

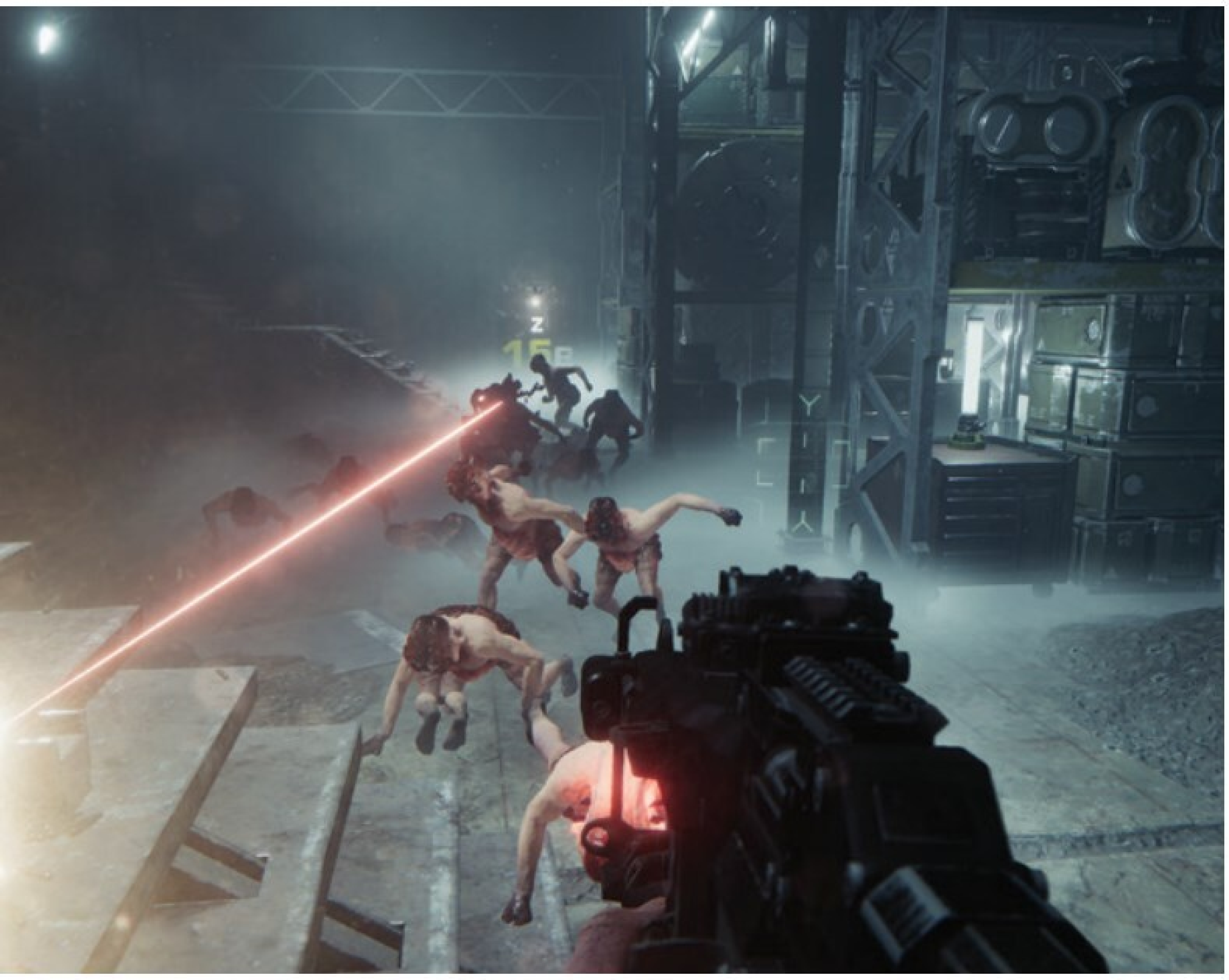
» Platform
PC

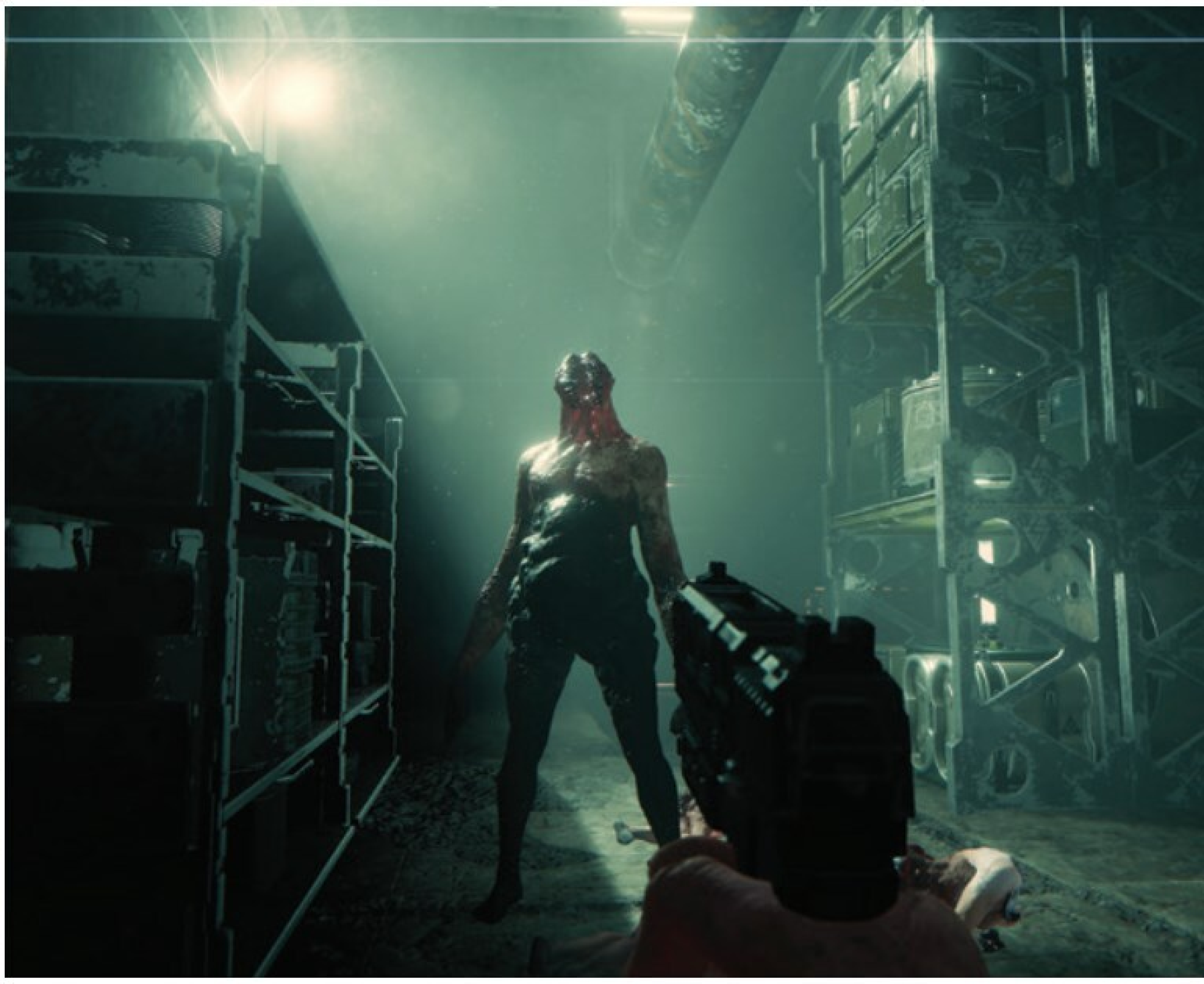
» Style
4-Player Online Shooter

» Publisher
10 Chambers Collective

» Developer
10 Chambers Collective

» Release
2019





The Cycle

Competitive shooting in harsh alien worlds

» Platform
PC
» Style
Online Multiplayer Shooter
» Publisher
Yager
» Developer
Yager
» Release
TBA

Yager (Spec Ops: The Line, Dreadnought) is taking its craft to first-person competitive shooting with a frantic PvE/PvP mix entited The Cycle.

Alone or with a team of four, players drop onto a harsh alien planet armed with only a basic weapon and the will to win. Each round is different, providing the player or team with a variety of goals and objectives to fulfill in order to earn points. At the end of each match, victory goes to the player or team that scored the most points. These tasks for scoring points vary, including scouring the map for A.I. enemies to battle and destroy, setting up harvesting nodes to bring in a resource trickle, carrying around valuable objects that add points over time but make you a target, and many others. Of course, you're not alone either, as player-vs-player interactions are a major part of the experience. Whether you're solo or with a team, the end goal is the same – outscore your opponents by completing a variety of objectives.

Goals change over the course of a map as well, leading to gameplay that's always dynamic. A boss enemy can spawn, worth a significant amount of points, but every player or team is going to want a slice, and it could end up being a massive bloodbath for all involved. Players can be revived when downed, and there's a "triage" mechanic allowing players to respawn if they die – but if you die a second time before your triage timer runs down, you're dust for good. The fact that permanent death is a real factor makes you pick and choose your encounters carefully. Fighting and eliminating opponents may take them out of the running, but it's going to cost you time and resources as well, and possibly your life. After the match timer sounds, everyone must scramble to get on the dropship for additional points, creating a potential death chokepoint where stragglers can be mopped up as they attempt to get off the planet.

Over the course of a game, you acquire resources from slaying monsters and finding valuable caches. However, all these aspects you grow into are set up outside of the match – what weapons you can purchase, what skills your character will obtain when you level up, what mods you want to attach to your sniper rifle, toxic ammunition, and more. This design allows everyone to start on relatively even ground regardless of how many games they've played, but allows for tons of player choice as the match goes on. If you're playing as part of a team, you can even choose to pool cash to a single player, allowing them to break the tempo of the game and call in a super powerful weapon early. Of course, while equipping your crackshot with a god-tier sniper rifle in the first few minutes may seem like a no-brainer, the rest of the team is going to be woefully undergeared with their baby pistols as a trade-off. Account level unlocks for weaponry, class specializations, and mods keep a strong sense of progression happening outside the moment-to-moment action.

Throwing PvE and PvP into the mix for a dynamic objective race is a recipe for interesting situations and fun, so I'm eager to see where Yager takes us with The Cycle later this year.
» Daniel Tack

Spellbreak

Frenzied fantasy fighting

The battle royale space is bursting with guns, grenades, and gravitas, from realistic interpretations of weapons and war to robots and lasers. Spellbreak offers a decidedly different take on the genre, with gauntlet-driven spellcasting and fantastical leveling in green fields dotted with majestic castles and treasure chests.

The most notable difference between aiming down the sights and Spellbreak's magical world is how weapons fire. Dropping to locations on the map, your priority is often finding one of many different gauntlets that come with infused spells. Each school of magic's attacks are different kinds of skillshots that must be aimed and used correctly in order to survive. For instance, an explosive straight-line fireball attack is fairly standard, but toxins fire in a lobbing arc and leave poison on the ground. Combining gauntlets and attack styles is powerful stuff, and that's just the beginning. In addition to their basic attack styles, gauntlets also provide incredibly potent magical bursts on longer cooldowns that can turn the tide of battle.

Gauntlets may be the most important part of a wizard's arsenal, but other gear augments your survival initiatives as well, like belts, boots, and special runes. While armor provides stat boosts and other subtle effects, runes offer cooldown-driven active abilities that can let you blink around the battlefield, fly high into the air, or skulk around invisible.

At the beginning of each match, players select two different schools of magic from a large pool of options. These range from bolstered defenses to better chances of getting loot. Veteran players may opt to go with trees that reward consistent landing of spells and mobility options, while new players can find some respite with schools that offer protection or an additional life after death. Mixing and matching these school trees has a profound impact on your power level, and you can even plan for your playstyle by selecting trees that sync up with your favorite weapons. If you have an affinity for toxins, delving into that path provides a ton of added lethality, assuming you can find the gauntlets to start flinging poison.

While you level up normally over the course of a game, consumable red orbs scattered across the playspace and highlighted on the mini-map provide an instant rank up, making them highly sought-after rewards. These locations (along with giant castles loaded with treasure) are hotspots where you're likely to find other players all looking for an edge.

In a battle royale landscape full of grit, guns, and bullet drop, Spellbreak feels special. Available now in an alpha form on the Epic Games store, we'll see if it has the magic to succeed as it continues along the path to release this year.
» **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
100-Player Online Action

» **Publisher**
Proletariat

» **Developer**
Proletariat

» **Release**
TBA

A Plague Tale: Innocence

Navigating the horrors of history

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Focus Home Interactive

» Developer
Asobo Studio

» Release
May 14

Gamers are no stranger to world-threatening calamites, but rarely are they grounded in actual history. In Asobo Studio's upcoming adventure game, A Plague Tale: Innocence, players look back on a particularly tumultuous time in France's history through the eyes of two young siblings trying to survive the combined devastation of The 100 Years' War, the Inquisition, and the deadly Black Plague.

Our demo begins with the older of these two siblings, Amicia, accompanying her father on a quiet hunting trip in the forest behind their homestead. As the two discuss Amicia's chronically ill brother Hugo and the toll it takes on their mother, the gameplay walks us through its fairly standard third-person controls. We learn that Amicia can hide from enemies (or in this case a wild boar) by crouching in tall grass and wind up and shoot her sling with the left and right triggers, respectively.

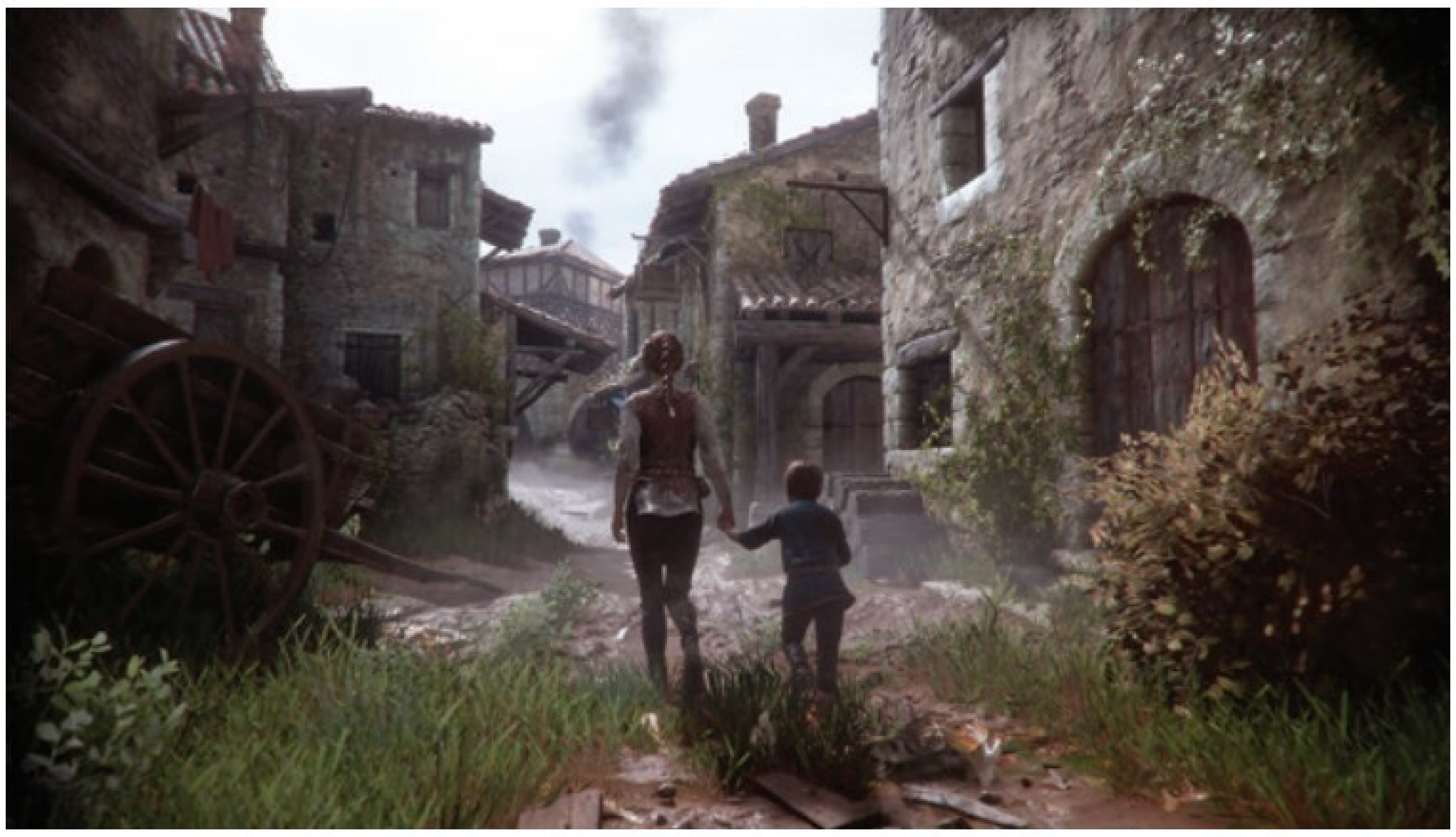
This short expedition serves as the tutorial, but it also establishes more than just the controls. From the detailed environments to the fluid character animations, A Plague Tale looks superb, and is more in line with what you might expect from a triple-A action game than a modest adventure title. It's also evident from Amicia's thoughtful interactions with her father that Asobo's first priority is telling a compelling and meaningful story.

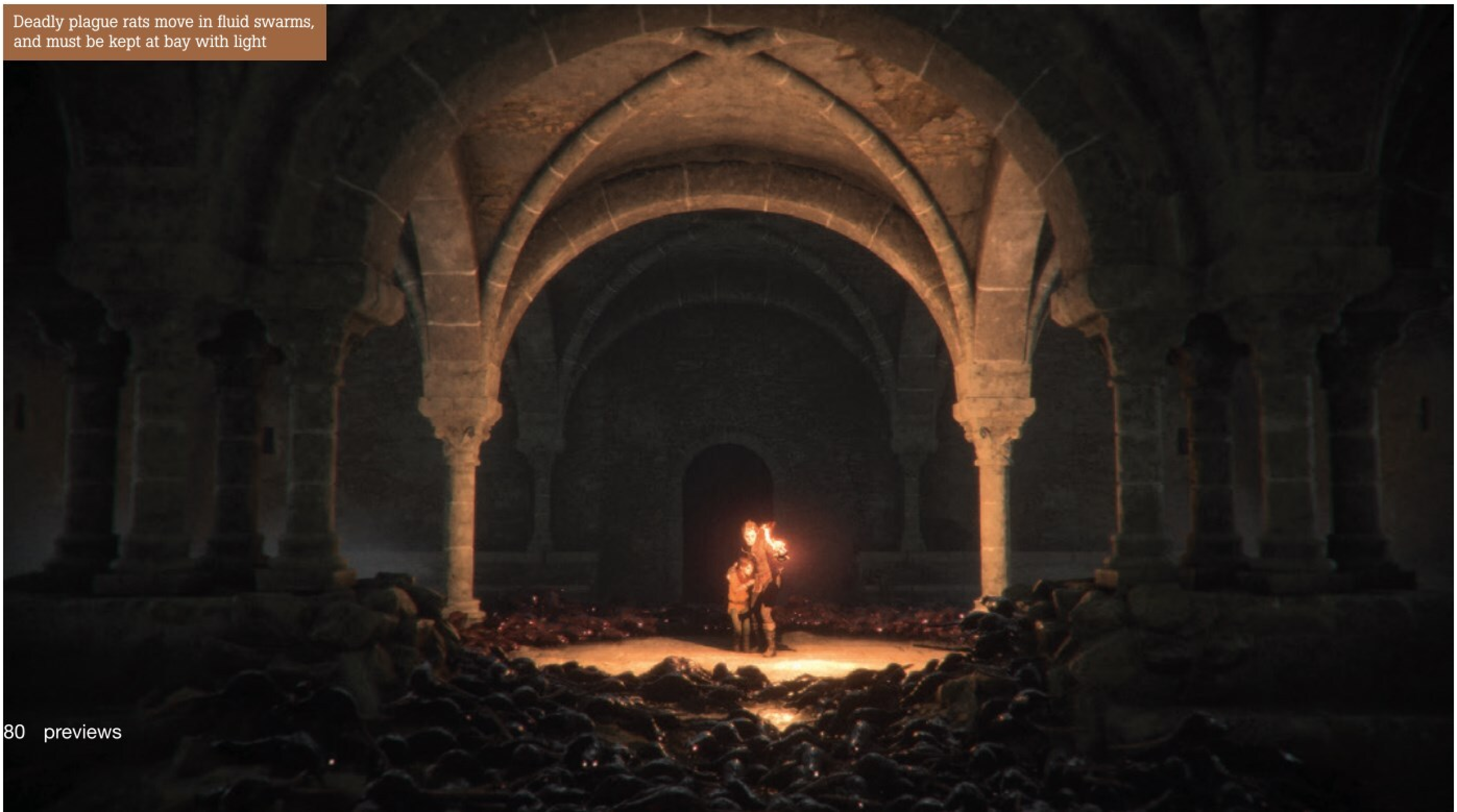
Without getting into spoilers for said story, a disturbing turn of events leaves Amicia and her father rushing back home, only to find the Inquisition has arrived at their doorstep looking for Hugo. Amicia hurries to her brother's room as her father confronts the armed soldiers, and from there she must use her newly learned stealth skills to sneak him out alive. In addition to hiding, Amicia can distract enemies by throwing rocks at metal objects or picking up and tossing clay pots. It's another familiar mechanic that nonetheless serves the linear escape sequence well.

A while later, Amicia and Hugo head to a nearby monastery in search of the boy's doctor, a man named Laurentius. As the two siblings make their way down into the underground crypt, we are introduced to A Plague Tale's most unique and surprising mechanic: A cascade of deadly plague rats flood the room, pouring in through every hole and crack in the walls. Thankfully, the diseased rodents are afraid of light, and Amicia must solve several torch-based puzzles (and take advantage of a few well-placed ham hocks) to distract the fluid swarms and reach the exit.

Balancing escort missions is never easy, but the opening chapters of A Plague Tale handle Amicia and Hugo's relationship well. During a few scripted moments, Hugo makes noise or runs off in a way that's believable for a scared child, but still frustrating. During actual gameplay, however, Hugo dutifully listens to your commands and helps out by crawling through holes and unlocking doors for Amicia. More importantly, Asobo succeeds at creating a bond between the siblings and the player, one that left us eager to see what comes next when A Plague Tale launches next month.

» Jeff Marchiafava





Deadly plague rats move in fluid swarms, and must be kept at bay with light

Stormland

Storming the castle

After a couple of years on the market, VR has slowly amassed some worthwhile titles and experiences, but Oculus Rift owners are still hungry for deeper games and larger worlds to explore. Insomniac's Stormland might help fill those voids.

In the matter of only a few years, Insomniac has cut its teeth on VR by making titles like The Unspoken, Feral Rites, and Edge of Nowhere, but Stormland looks like its most polished VR experience to date. You control an android gardener tasked with tending an alien planet. However, after a massive storm knocks out your settlement, you are forced to rebuild your home and your robotic body as you hunt for fellow survivors.

Like many recent VR games, you move through the world with the left analog stick and look around your environment by moving your head. As you explore, you engage in several firefights with robotic drones and automatons that are minions of a mysterious faction known as The Tempest. At any time, you can reach down to grab a pair of semi-automatic pistols magnetized to your waist. The gunplay feels good, and like many other VR shooters, you simply have to aim and shoot at your targets, and I had a lot of fun physically diving for cover. Insomniac says later on, you can also craft new weapons, grenades, and other upgrades.

While the firefights are fun, the moments between the action might be more compelling. Early on, I acquired a magnetic grapple ability that allowed me to climb designated metal surfaces. I felt a bit like Spider-Man as I physically moved my arms to shimmy up vertical walls, but you can also fling yourself several feet into the air or launch yourself across small gaps using your body's momentum. VR really helps amplify the sense of exploration and the thrill of swinging several hundred feet off the ground.

Your little android is also equipped with arm thrusters, so when you jump off a cliff you gently glide down to the surface. Thanks to the Rift's motion controls, your trajectory is affected by the position of your arm. If you put your arms forward, you will glide down more quickly, but if you tuck your arms close to your body you slow your decent. These arm thrusters can also be used to surf along clouds, which pool together on the surface of the planet like lakes. Navigating the forgotten ruins of Stormland was a lot of fun, and I enjoyed hunting for secrets around every corner.

Insomniac isn't ready to show off Stormland's multiplayer mode, but the team says players will be able to link up with several friends and explore this massive alien playground together when Stormland launches later this year. If you're a VR enthusiast craving a deeper experience, this sci-fi adventure should be on your radar.

» **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
Rift

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Oculus

» **Developer**
Insomniac Games

» **Release**
2019

Wrath: Aeon Of Ruin

A simpler, bloodier time

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter

» Publisher
3D Realms,
1C Entertainment

» Developer
Kill Pixel

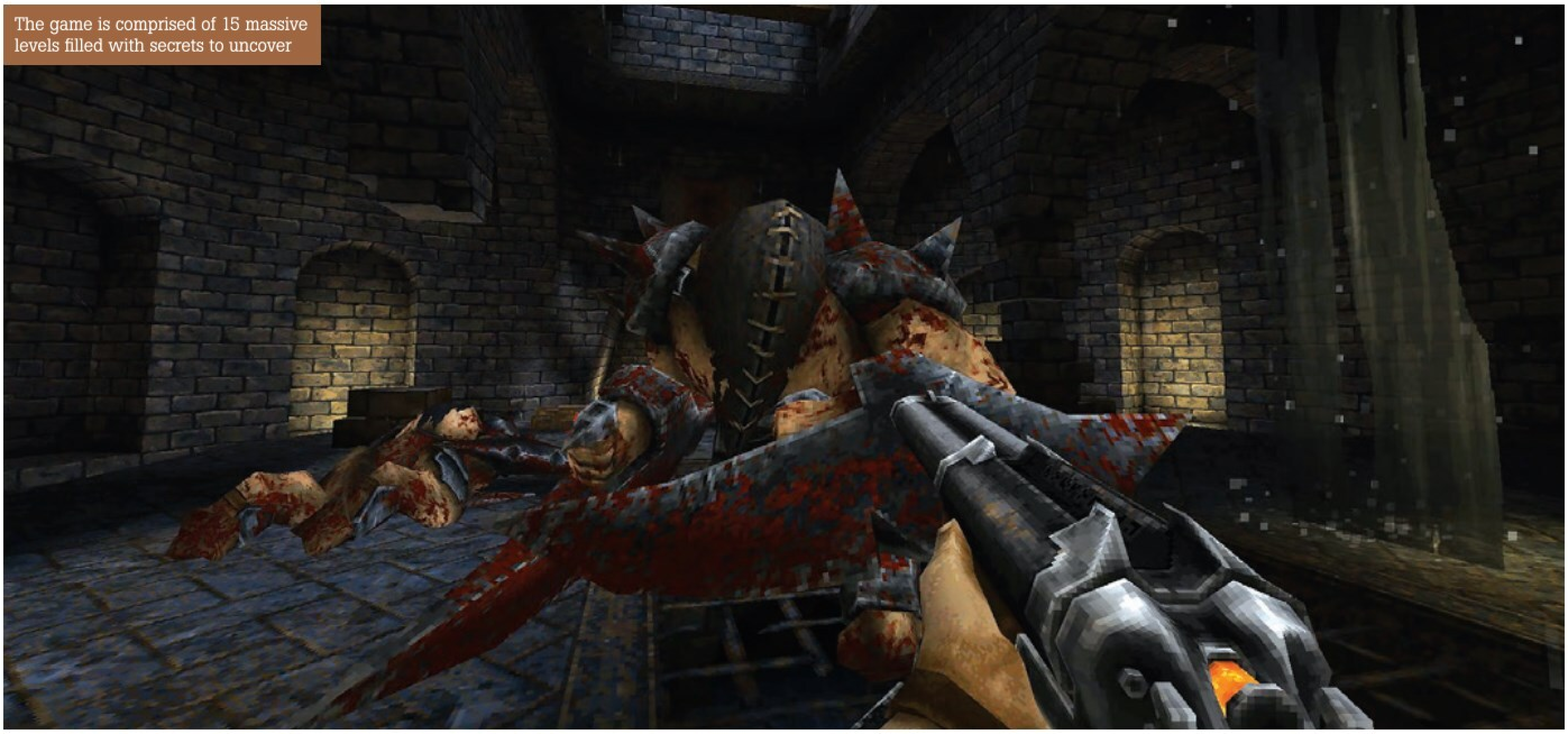
» Release
Summer (Switch, PC),
TBA (PS4, Xbox One)

Last year, 3D Realms, the developer behind classics like Duke Nukem 3D, returned to the bloodthirsty shooters the company made its name on – this time as a publisher. The company announced it was bankrolling Ion Maiden, a promising pixel FPS created in the same Build Engine that powered Duke Nukem 3D and Shadow Warrior. Ion Maiden isn't fully out in the wild yet, but 3D Realms already has another project in the works with Wrath: Aeon of Ruin. Wrath is being built from the ground up in the same engine that made Quake, by a group of long-time Quake modders referring to themselves as Kill Pixel. Whereas Ion Maiden looked to gory slapstick '80s sci-fi movies like *Robocop* for inspiration, Wrath takes on a more heavy metal album cover vibe while also drawing inspiration from Bloodborne's mysterious, Lovecraftian world.

As a wanderer (known as Outlander) trapped between life and death in a place called The Ageless Sea, you roam through dimensions with fantastical settings like forests, tombs, and sunken ruins to battle against massive figures known as the Guardians of the Old World. The over-the-top dark fantasy leanings of Wrath do it a lot of favors, with great enemy types like nasty howling beats and machinegun-toting golems. The world is hideous but also a mesmerizing place to inhabit, with ancient towers and tombs covered in weeping blood as well as mazes of ascending stairs guarded by foes, requiring you to watch your step while you engage in tricky firefights. During our hands-on preview, I played through one of Wrath's 15 massive levels. I squared off against foes with a shotgun that's secondary fire blasts ricochet pellets all across the room, creating halls of bouncing death balls, as well as a satisfying arm blade capable of turning lines of foes into bloody chunks.

Wrath has more going for it than just solid retro first-person shooter gameplay. The items you pick up in the world and equip in your inventory have a heavy risk-reward factor to them. For example, you might discover an item that takes you down all the way to 10 health points but also makes you invincible for 10 seconds. This is a valuable trump card when you're overwhelmed and about to lose in a firefight. Another item lets you leech health off foes you kill for a limited time, while another lets you place checkpoints anywhere you want, giving you control over where you save your game (but saves are finite). There's enough here that adds to the fast and frantic style that recent throwback shooters like Dusk have capitalized on to great effect. The fittingly metal soundtrack, scored by Bjørn Jacobsen, former senior audio designer on Cyberpunk 2077, does a solid job of driving firefights.

Wrath is due out on Switch and PC this summer, with PS4 and Xbox One releases to follow sometime after. Those who love old shooters or yearn for an enticing combination of dark fantasy and satisfying gunplay, should be getting pumped for the bloody basket of goods 3D Realms and Kill Pixel is bringing to the table this time.
» Javy Gwaltney


The game is comprised of 15 massive levels filled with secrets to uncover

The soundtrack is composed by Bjørn Jacobsen, who worked on Cyberpunk 2077

Heaven's Vault

An archeological space adventure

Inkle, the developers behind the 2014 mobile game 80 Days, are working on a new story-driven adventure centered on exploring alien worlds and learning ancient languages.

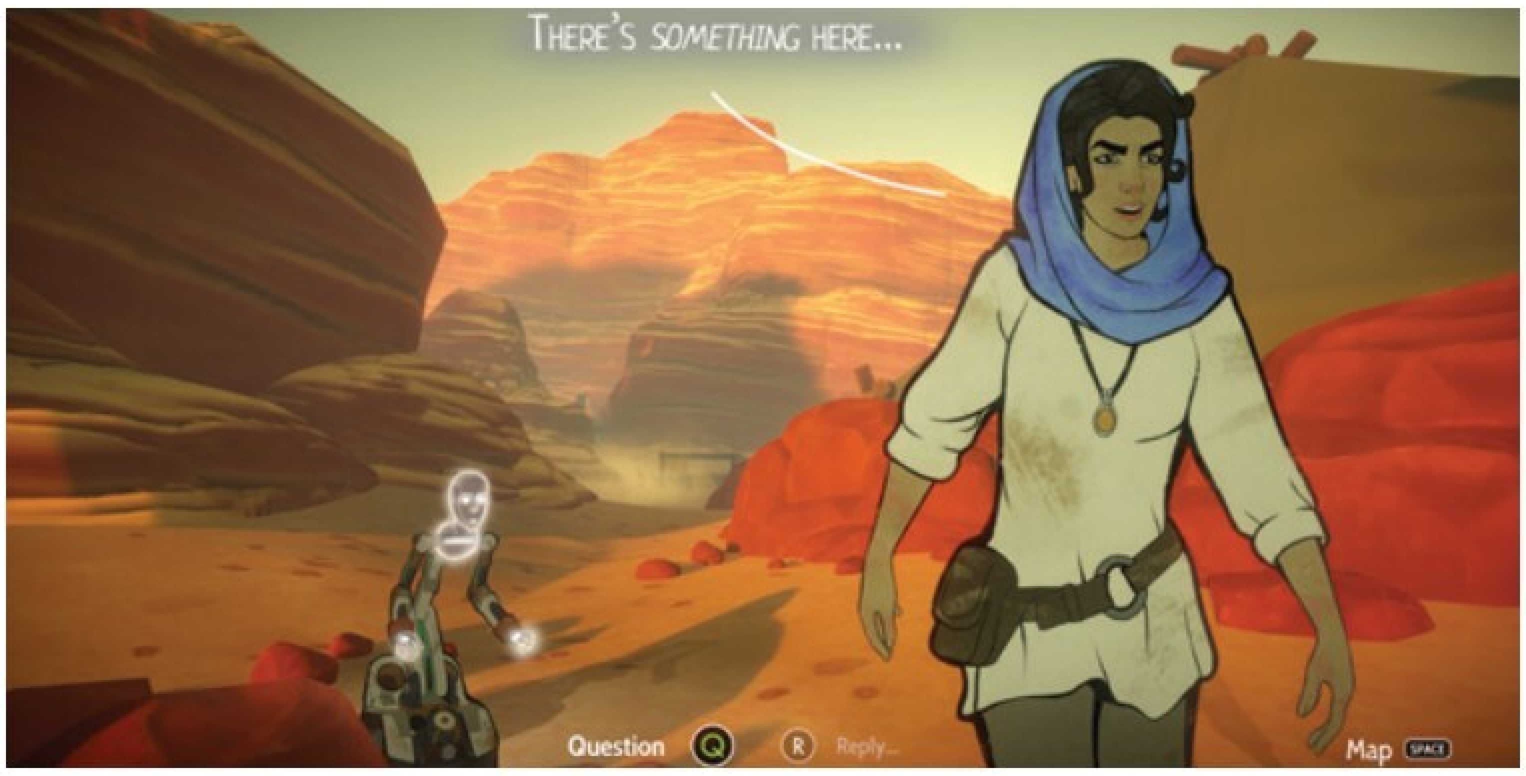
Titled Heaven's Vault, you play as a young archeologist named Aliya Elasra and her robot Six, as they journey to distant moons in the Nebula to track down a missing roboticist. Rather than fighting off alien threats, you uncover artifacts left behind from ancient civilizations and attempt to decipher their archaic languages.

Learning bits of vocabulary based on hieroglyphs is Heaven's Vault's main mechanic, and it's surprisingly well done. Whenever you come across objects with inscriptions, you must guess the correct definitions based on prior clues you've found from other items or interactions with people. It's similar to learning a real language, where Aliya recognizes previous glyphs to narrow her understanding of future ones.

During my demo, I land on a moon with lush forests and crops. It was a joy to explore because of the game's gorgeous aesthetic, which mixes 3D rendered environments with 2D hand-drawn characters. My time on the moon is spent talking to inhabitants and deciphering inscriptions for more information.

Between exploring moons, you sail through space on your steampunk-esque ship through "rivers," which are like currents that help push you forward. Unfortunately, these sections were my least favorite part, because maneuvering the ship is clunky with imprecise controls. I often missed turns or, for reasons I don't understand, had my ship nearly come to a stop despite hauling the sails. This made space traversal frustrating and long, but interesting dialogue helps pass the time during these lackluster moments. With Aliya's aversion towards robots and Six's inability to understand sarcasm, conversations between the two are entertaining.

Heaven's Vault is unique and ambitious with its language-based mechanic, and a lot of detail has been put into the lore, characters, and moons you frequent. I look forward to continuing this archeological space adventure when it launches later this year. » **Elise Favis**



» Platform
PS4 • PC • Mac • iOS

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Inkle Ltd

» Developer
Inkle Ltd

» Release
Spring

GameStop
POWERUP
REWARDS

REWARDS CENTER

$10
Google Play
$25
UBER
Nintendo eShop
For use on Nintendo systems*
$5
GameStop $5 REWARDS CERTIFICATE
GameStop $25 REWARDS CERTIFICATE
THINKGEEK $15 REWARDS CERTIFICATE
THINKGEEK $10 REWARDS CERTIFICATE

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gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

86 The Division 2

With three years of hard-learned lessons from its first looter-shooter, Ubisoft Massive understands exactly what a live-service game should be. Just as you're finishing up the expertly designed and memorable story missions, The Division 2's grim open world explodes with a wealth of engaging end-game content and new, rewarding loops. A dizzying array of customization options – from your guns and gear to skills and specializations – give you and your friends a fighting chance against surprisingly adept A.I. gunmen, your fellow Dark Zone plunderers, and all the challenges yet to come.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Long loading screens.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

5 TO 9 > 9 TO 5
PARK
CONVENIENT TO
THEATERS
OFFICE BUILDINGS
BARS
PARKING
$3. EA. 15 MIN.
$15. DAILY MAX.
CITY TAX INCLUDED
$10.
AFTER 4 P.M.
$10. FLAT RATE
SAT & SUN
Corolla

The Greater Than Ever Corolla

With available 18-inch machined alloy wheels[1] and standard LED headlights, you've got style for days — or nights that turn into early mornings. ***Let's Go Places.***

Prototype shown with options. [1]Performance tires are expected to experience greater tire wear than conventional tires. Tire life may be less than 24,000 miles, depending upon driving conditions. ©2019 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.

The Division 2

A live-service shooter done right

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer GOLD

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Massive/Ubisoft Red Storm **Release** March 15 **Rating** M

9

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Restore order in the nation's capital by taking out thuggish factions and collecting newer, better weapons

» Graphics
Ubisoft's remarkable attention to detail fills Washington, D.C. with interesting environmental stories, and the dynamic weather creates evolving combat situations. The bloom effects can be blinding and the pitch-black darkness of night makes me wonder why they didn't equip agents with flashlights

» Sound
The laughable enemy barks and meek-sounding weaponry make sound design a weak point of an otherwise stellar game

» Playability
The classless skill system allows you to customize your play experience to your liking and swap on the fly. Gunplay is more satisfying than the first game, but the sticky cover system can leave you unintentionally exposed when moving to new positions

» Entertainment
The story falls short, but The Division 2 is filled with loops to keep you invested in upgrading your agent well beyond the endgame, including gear-score optimization, Dark Zone ventures, and daily challenges

» Replay Value
High

Ubisoft learned a lot of lessons during the evolution of its first looter shooter, The Division, which steadily blossomed into a game that maximized its potential and earned an adulating fan base. But transitioning from of a fully fleshed-out live service to a sequel is a harrowing road filled with many pitfalls, as Bungie experienced with the bungled Destiny 2 launch. The Division 2 heeds those warnings and skillfully sticks its landing, offering a wealth of engaging content that should keep players invested long after they finish the campaign.

The original Division earned detractors for its spongy combat. The cognitive dissonance of needing to unload a full clip into the head of a garbageman was hard for some to shake. This problem is largely diverted in the sequel; the time-to-kill is much shorter for basic enemies, the crazed rushers are often hopped up on some stimulant when they charge at you with wild abandon, and the biggest baddies are covered in armor you need to pick away at before revealing their meaty centers. The large variety of enemies creates a strategic layer that keeps engagements exciting well into the endgame. Intense satisfaction comes from a well-placed turret mowing down a legion of enemies or landing a shot on a suicide bomber that takes out other baddies in the vicinity.

The combat also shines thanks to Ubisoft's fantastic mission designs. The star character of The Division 2 is Washington, D.C. itself. The game takes you to so many historical landmarks, museums, and other popular destinations, the only thing missing is the sightseeing bus route. I battled through the U.S. Capitol, depleted enemy ranks around the Washington Monument, and ventured through so many museums I started to think of the game as tourism with guns.

Ubisoft's ramshackle version of Washington, D.C. is packed with rich environmental storytelling about a nation undone, but if you look too closely, the story falls apart like a house of cards. Ubisoft never adequately explores how the country went from a shining beacon of democracy to a dystopian wasteland in just seven months. What little backstory the game offers about the world and its characters is largely relegated to the found-footage menus.

The Division 2's plot may not keep you invested, but the well-designed loops should. The game doles out improved skills, weaponry, and armor at steady clip no matter what activity you are performing, and you have several ways to improve the situation in the capital. Piecing together the perfect array of gear with powerful bonuses stays compelling well beyond the campaign.

When you reach level cap and wrap the story missions, a new faction undoes much of your progress, which initially feels like a bummer after you worked so hard to capture all the control points. Thankfully, Ubisoft smartly changes up the mission replays with new objectives, and the fearsome new foes provide the most challenging and interesting fights in the game. You have plenty to do during this endgame loop, including three new specialization weapon-progression paths, new projects, side missions, clan rewards, and daily/weekly assignments. After playing for 60 hours, I still have two full specialization tracks to develop while I piece together my ideal loadouts.

Endgame is the perfect time to explore the Dark Zone, the dangerous region where enemies are more formidable, gear is better, and players can turn the weapons on each other. In a bid to incentivize more agents to venture into these contaminated zones, Ubisoft normalized the weapon stats so everyone is on an even playing field and split the Dark Zone into three smaller spaces. The normalization goes a long way toward evening the odds, which I appreciate, but encounters with opposing players are rare. Ubisoft also includes a couple competitive versus modes, but these feel more like experiments than full experiences.

Complex, shared open worlds have a lot of moving parts, so technical problems are inevitable. While The Division 2 is mostly stable, it has issues that need to be resolved. The scaling when pairing players of different levels needs recalibration; while the lower-level players deliver damage at a comparable rate, their armor isn't adequately scaled, so they are often downed in one shot. I also encountered several crashes during the long stronghold missions, but the servers at least save your place and you reboot right back into the mission.

Story failings and technical hiccups aside, Ubisoft has a winner on its hands with The Division 2. The strong combat, interesting missions, and compelling loot loop kept me invested through the endgame, and I don't plan to stop playing anytime soon. For a live-service game just getting out of the gate, that's quite an achievement. **» Matt Bertz**

POLICE
POLICE

Devil May Cry 5

A stylish return to form

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** March 8 **Rating** M

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Return to the classic stylish action of Devil May Cry with lots of flashy combos and familiar faces, plus a new playable character

» Graphics
This more realistic vision of the DMC universe looks great, though some of the enemy designs seem to blend together this time around

» Sound
The soundtrack is the usual mix of ambient gothic and rock music, and the voice performances are well done

» Playability
Controlling Nero and Dante again is comfortable and intuitive. V's combat style takes longer to learn and feels less precise, but offers something different

» Entertainment
Chaining together impressive combos is as fun as ever, though hopping among three characters makes it hard to hone your expertise

» Replay Value
Moderately high

The Devil May Cry series began with Dante, a lone demon hunter. Today, he's not so lonely; other playable characters have rotated in over the years, including Vergil, Nero, Trish, and Lady. Devil May Cry 5 expands the cast again with V, a mysterious man who uses demonic companions to fight. V offers a unique approach to DMC's stylish battles compared to the slash-and-shoot mechanics of Dante and Nero, but his addition comes at a cost: Bouncing among three characters provides fun variety, but it keeps you wading in the shallows of combat too long, rather than letting you dive into its impressive depths.

The core appeal of Devil May Cry is stringing moves together to form your own elaborate and spectacular combos. Devil May Cry 5 generally delivers a precise and satisfying (if familiar) version of that formula. You launch underworld abominations into the air, slice them up, and blast them from afar, all using responsive controls that make it easy to cut through the horde. The story is ridiculous and barely coherent, but it works thanks to a few awesome moments I can't spoil here. All this serves as a consistently entertaining foundation, and all three playable heroes add their own variations.

You start playing as Nero, who still uses his sword, gun, and grab to combine mobility and lethality. The biggest change from previous entries comes from his robotic arms. Each arm gives you different powers, like firing off a metal fist to pummel an enemy, supercharging your attacks, or giving you an extra mid-air dash. I liked experimenting with these tricks, but because you can't switch your arms on the fly, their utility feels too contextual. Plus, regulating and replenishing your supply of arms adds a layer of resource management that just isn't fun.

Controlling V offers a departure from tradition, since his approach is all about staying back while directing his demonic allies' actions and summoning a brute when his Devil Trigger fills. Even though using V to plow through fodder enemies from a distance is cool, his haphazard style isn't great for focused encounters, and provides a diminished sense of strategic accomplishment.

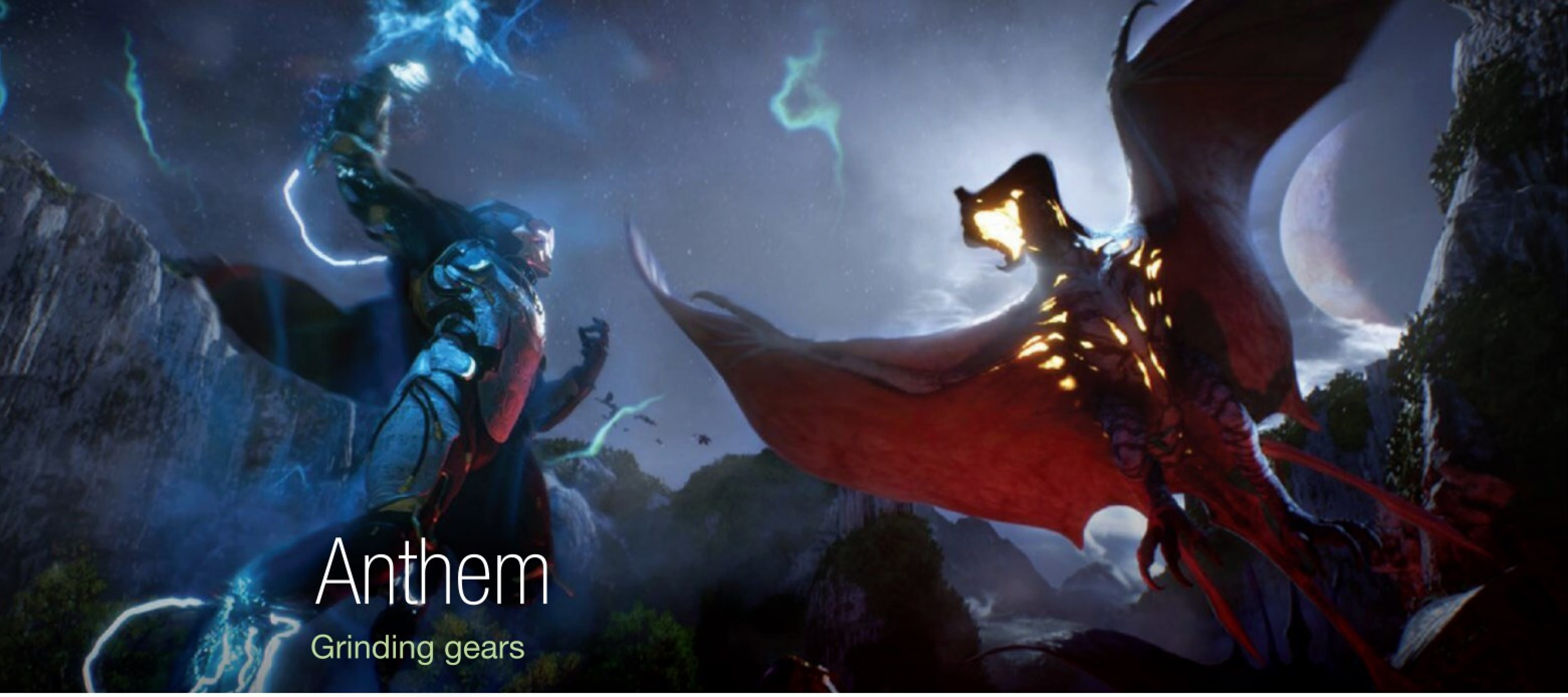
Dante has some new weapons (like dual rocket launchers) and a twist on his Devil Trigger, but he is the least surprising and most fun of the three heroes. Switching among various styles and weapons feels like the classic DMC I love, and I'm glad Dante's the one squaring off against DMC 5's most fearsome foes. That's not something you can change, since only 2 missions (of 21 total) let you choose your hero, while the rest are assigned.

This structure creates a few frustrations. You play as Nero for a bit, and then you switch to V. But V is a blank slate, so you have to start from scratch, often re-buying abilities (like increased speed) that are practically identical to what you've already bought for Nero. Then you do the same thing again when Dante unlocks. This gives the pacing a weird, start-and-stop sensation that makes it hard to gain momentum.

The diffuse gameplay focus also prevents you from accessing the full complexity of each character in a single playthrough. Capcom must have recognized this problem, because the solution appears to be making sure none of the fights require full comprehension of your capabilities. I'm not saying the game is a total cakewalk, but I was about halfway through my second playthrough (on the harder difficulty that unlocks after completion) when I finally hit fights that tested my limits, made me practice techniques, and forced me to improve.

Once you finally reach the depths, Devil May Cry 5 stands shoulder-to-shoulder with its predecessors. Each character has a solid complement of moves and abilities to play with, and some of the more difficult enemy configurations almost feel like puzzles as you prioritize and control the crowd while trying to maximize your rank and keep your health high for the next encounter. This loop kept me hooked post-game, but don't expect many gameplay-related incentives to keep playing on other than the simple satisfaction of getting better and finishing harder modes.

For all of its pacing issues, Devil May Cry 5 is still a lot of fun to play. Combat is a blast, and the cutscenes are delightfully absurd; fans of Devil May Cry 3 and 4 should feel right at home here. Capcom goes back to the baseline action I've always enjoyed, and executes that with the series' signature over-the-top style. However, this entry's changes and additions to that core experience don't enhance what the series does well; they feel more like roadblocks than steps forward. » **Joe Juba**



Anthem

Grinding gears

7

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** BioWare **Release** February 22 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
A cooperative shooter that soars with combat but stumbles with story

» **Graphics**
The blending of fantasy and science-fiction genres pays off handsomely in visual design. Few games shower the battlefield with a show of particles and explosions like Anthem achieves

» **Sound**
A constant stream of character chatter is joined by a great score that hits unique notes during combat

» **Playability**
The Iron Man fantasy is a lot of fun, yet most combat scenarios end up unfolding similarly

» **Entertainment**
Anthem tries to be too many things, and ends up losing focus in all aspects of the experience

» **Replay Value**
High

Anthem suffers from an identity crisis, torn between its efforts to be a cooperative shooter and a single-player story. In this unusual pairing of styles, we see BioWare spreading its wings to deliver something new, but also refusing to let go of the past. This makes for an uneven journey in which players are united and then forced to disperse for chunks of time. Anthem periodically shows us how both of these elements can be interesting and powerful on their own, but struggles to unite them, leading to aggravating progression that is sometimes poisoned further by performance issues and peculiar design.

Living up to BioWare's RPG pedigree, Anthem's world is inviting, mysterious, and filled with fascinating backstory and characters. We see humanity struggling to find its place in an alien land, hunkered down and on the brink of extinction in an old walled-up fort. The story setup succeeds in delivering the tone of desperation, but is muddied when you see the tools you get to use to help keep humanity alive. You don't get a sword, or a banged up gun. You basically get to be Iron Man. You are given a powered exosuit called a javelin that is designed to be a one-person army-killer.

The javelins are Anthem's biggest triumph, making almost every little action feel like you are controlling a superhero capable of unleashing hell. Javelins give their users temporary jet-fueled flight and a wonderfully deep arsenal of offensive and defensive tools to play with.

Flight is handled exceptionally well, allowing players to skim dangerously close to rocky terrain, plunge into water, dart out of it like a dolphin, and quickly transition into a hover where shoulder-mounted rockets and firearms can be used. All four javelin types are nicely designed and a blast to control. Raining down elemental chaos as the Storm is as good as it gets, but just blasting enemies with machine guns as the Ranger ends up being a great time too.

Anthem begins to show cracks in its armor in the tasks the javelins are asked to complete. Whether you're on a story mission or are freely exploring the world, the activities all bleed together in familiar ways. You arrive at a location, waves of enemies teleport in, and there's a good chance you'll be asked to track down a specific number of items in the nearby area to activate a strange device. Despite the combat being exceptionally fun, the gameplay loops stagnate quickly.

The four javelin classes are meant to complement one another, but coordination and teamwork are not necessary for most of the game. For roughly 20 hours, Anthem feels a bit like a single-player game masquerading as a co-op experience. During the story-based campaign, we didn't need to sync up attacks or send in the Colossus to draw fire. We annihilated every threat with relative ease. The true vision of co-op isn't realized until the player finishes the campaign and hits the level cap. At this point, the grandmaster difficulty levels are unlocked, and they live up to their name. Only at this point did I find the need to coordinate with other players. The endgame doesn't offer much that the player hasn't seen up to that point, but the higher difficulty makes the missions and three strongholds far more entertaining. It's too bad it takes this long for Anthem to show its true colors.

When any mission concludes, loot is handed out liberally, early on delivering a satisfying haul of goods that slows to a disappointing drip after level cap. Post-mission, the player is then forced to return to the fort. This is where the single-player story unfolds, and time basically stands still, especially if you are in a party of friends. BioWare wants you to get to know the characters on a personal level, much like the quality time spent on the *Normandy* in the Mass Effect games. This design doesn't work in Anthem. It alienates the cooperative dynamic, and is also guilty of feigning player choice. In most conversations you can pick from one of two things to say, but they're all binary choices, and don't change much of anything other than a character's immediate response. As much as I enjoyed Anthem's side stories, the central plotline is a predictable eye-roller with ham-fisted drama and a terrible villain at its core. BioWare has struggled to create interesting villains before, but the Monitor is easily the studio's worst.

I ended up dreading going to the fort, not just for the story, but because of how long it takes to load. I can't recall another game that loads so much. Just loading the fort or a mission can take minutes. If you just want to look at your weapons or change your armor in the forge, there's a load.

Anthem should have been all about that Iron Man fantasy. When the guns are pumping and the thrusters are ignited, the game is a legitimate blast to play. That's where the experience shines, and everything else holds it back from being truly engrossing. This is one of those games that frustrates because you can see the greatness within it, but it's always just out of reach.
» **Andrew Reiner**

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

Exaltation amidst expiration

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Activision **Developer** From Software **Release** March 22 **Rating** M

9

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Command a powerful ninja through a bloody tour of Sengoku-period Japan, using deception, cunning, and rigorous combat to take your enemies down

» Graphics
A healthy variety of environments keeps things interesting as you proceed, with especially larger-than-life boss encounters

» Sound
An excellent score highlights the intensity and tension during battle and adds additional life to each of the major zones

» Playability
This is an extremely difficult game for those looking for a serious challenge. Not everyone will be able to complete or enjoy this title

» Entertainment
Sekiro is a wild ride through narrative twists and shocking boss battles, and an amazing triumph or crushing defeat is ever only seconds away

» Replay Value
High

From Software's success with the combat-oriented Souls-like subgenre takes a new shape in Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice. While the game is still about big bosses and precise conflict like the studio's high-profile titles, Sekiro plays differently than previous works. In addition to mastering a new style of fierce and unforgiving combat, you also have to start thinking like a ninja, using every tool in your arsenal to tip the scales against opponents with tricky movesets and multiple phases. Despite having no traditional level-ups, you have many ways to advance your character by finding items in the world, acquiring new skills, and discovering vendors.

Using Sekiro's ninja arsenal is a joy. Grappling around the environment to find secret areas or set up a deathblow from above feels wonderful and snappy. Sekiro has access to a host of Shinobi prosthetics tailored to a variety of situations, including firecrackers to stun and scare beasts and an umbrella to deflect incoming attacks. You also obtain a wide variety of combat arts and ninjutsu that allow for special deathblow effects, giving you a plethora of combinations and skills to approach each encounter with. These abilities can often have both story and combat functionality, utilizing them in interesting ways to complete quest objectives or open up windows of opportunity during bosses – but to say more about this aspect would spoil some serious surprises. And you need all the awesome combinations and applications, because Sekiro is a fascinating, frenetic dance of death at its best, and a frustrating exercise in futility at its worst.

Sekiro's intense boss battles are the absolute crux of the game. You must know your opponent's every move, plan your timing, and practice it to perfection, because a single error can mean instant death. Many opponents can annihilate you in seconds, even with the resurrection mechanic to give you extra chances should you fall to an enemy blow or blade. The moment your mind snaps under pressure is the moment the fight ends, leaving you to exhale and wonder what went wrong. When things sync up, you amaze yourself by the sheer wonder of it all as you counter your opponents' every move and hammer them down, flowing like a waterfall of masterfully timed excellence. In those moments, you become the ninja. It's a hell of a rush when it happens, but be prepared to spend hours on fights perfecting your rhythm and craft. The feeling when you get so close and make a critical mistake at the very end is soul-crushing. The death penalty adds to this, slicing off resources upon your demise and crippling friendly characters you meet along the way with a malignant illness. While it is psychologically damaging to see your friends waste away, the disease has gameplay consequences as well; characters afflicted with the rot may not have their questlines available until healed through the use of rare items.

Outside of boss battles, Sekiro's ninja skills are a lot of fun in the world, which opens up around midway through the game. Sekiro has plenty of zone and enemy variety, so you won't be confined to taking on soldiers and samurai in the castle for long. You can select multiple directions to travel, a great boon that lets you explore other zones if you get stuck on a boss. While your traversal abilities and speed make zipping through areas a breeze, you must stop to carefully explore to avoid missing critical items. Skills acquired late in the game allow for you to explore earlier spaces in different ways, accessing locations that were previously unavailable. Dozens of mini-bosses help increase your character's survivability, and you can use your guile to make those clashes much easier, whether it's with a special prosthetic to exploit their weaknesses or using the environment to set up a stealth deathstrike to begin the fight.

Sekiro's story moves in strange and compelling ways that defy the initial adherence to the trappings of feudal Japan, and allows the player to discover multiple endings and confrontations depending on choices and secrets. It's a challenging journey through a weird and wondrous world that forces you to learn and master its punishing combat to succeed. However, the sweet thrill of victory keeps you pushing forward despite myriad disheartening deaths. Sekiro is one of the most difficult games I have ever played, but for those seeking adventure, exploration, and a truly realized ninja fantasy, the trek is worth the high demands. » **Daniel Tack**

One Piece: World Seeker

King of the One Piece games

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Play as One Piece's super-powered protagonist in an open world. The adventure sees Luffy and his crew helping the citizens of an oppressed island take back their home

» Graphics
High-quality cel-shading makes all the characters look like their manga/anime counterparts, and the environments look great. Luffy's movement and combat animation are particular highlights

» Sound
The anime's fun soundtrack is present and well-emulated when it comes to new tracks. The sound of the wind whipping by as you launch through the world really sells the speed of Luffy's movement

» Playability
Controlling Luffy's movement feels great, and throwing punches and activating special attacks is simple and satisfying

» Entertainment
World Seeker lacks the detail of contemporary open-world games, but moving around and getting into fights is fun. The story and characters (new and old alike) are engaging all the way to the explosive finale

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** Ganbarion **Release** March 15 **Rating** T

Over the past 18 years, the anime/manga One Piece has received myriad video games across numerous genres. Among all those adaptations, World Seeker represents what is easily its most ambitious attempt to emulate what it might be like to be Luffy and be part of his Straw Hat crew. World Seeker may lack the detail and technical prowess of its open-world peers, but it delivers fun combat and exploration in an open environment with an enjoyable story to pull you along through the whole journey.

It all starts when Luffy and his crew, in their ongoing mission to acquire treasure, end up on an island that is home to multiple large pirate prisons. When it turns out the rumored treasure was just a ploy to get the Straw Hat crew to come to the island, Luffy escapes capture and decides to help the citizens get their homes back. This means getting in the middle of a decade-long conflict between those who appreciate the overbearing presence of the Marines on the island, and those who detest it. The prison island setting also serves as an excuse for some of Luffy's familiar opponents to appear as bosses or fun cameos. The story feels like One Piece all the way, which is a compliment. Luffy and his crew are familiar with standing up for those in need regardless of the conflicted histories that plague the islands they visit. Whether or not World Seeker is canon to the larger One Piece story (which is never explicitly made clear), this tale feels like it could be.

The thrill of moving through the world is World Seeker's biggest highlight. Whether Luffy's grabbing the sides of buildings or the tops of trees, his rubber arms propel you through the environments at high speed. It feels great, and after acquiring some upgrades, zipping from point to point lets you cover tons of ground quickly. Plus, it looks awesome. I enjoyed it so much, I often chose moving around that way instead of using the fast-travel system.

The open world looks nice and features diverse settings like a full city, forests, and a crystal mine embedded in a mountain, but it doesn't feel particularly alive. Despite the size of the city, the population is small, and most citizens stand still to offer up bits of dialogue. It gives you a chance to get to know everyone at least a little bit, which pays off well in the finale, but it's at the expense of the world not feeling particularly lived in.

Outside of talking to citizens and delivering requested materials found in the world or just generally exploring, the main way Luffy completes missions is by beating up bad guys. The combat is simple without any complicated combos, but you can switch between a powerful one-on-one focused stance or one with a wider range for big groups of weak enemies and use super attacks pulled directly from the source material. You can also mark enemies from a distance and stealth your way through encounters, which is especially satisfying on higher difficulties. The combat animations are great, which is good because you do see the same attacks often, but the speed of fighting is brisk enough that I didn't get bored.

A skill tree offers a collection of worthwhile upgrades, like being able to fly further when you launch yourself or spin your feet around like a helicopter to float, but a handful of duds mar the selection, like one that lets you open chests faster. Overall, the good upgrades and additional special attacks feel substantial, but not every skill is worth your experience points.

You can also focus on material collection to create items and new costumes, or send your crew off on missions to collect additional materials while you attend to the main quests. Your interactions with the main cast of characters is tracked with the Karma system, which doesn't offer a ton of in-game rewards, but I liked having a visual chart detailing my relationship with many of the characters I had come across in the adventure.

In terms of open-world game design, World Seeker isn't an innovator, but it borrows and re-imagines familiar mechanics well (from the Batman: Arkham games, in particular) and proves why they are perfect for the One Piece universe. I had a good time flinging myself around the open environment while using stretch abilities to beat up bad guys and enjoyed the story. I was eager to upgrade Luffy's best abilities, grow my Karma, and learn more about the island by completing as much of the side content as possible. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Yoshi's Crafted World

New look, same Yoshi

Style 1 or 2-Player Platforming **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Good Feel **Release** March 29 **Rating** E

Making art out of household objects requires creativity. If you hope to create something meaningful, you must see items like paper plates or cardboard boxes for more than what they appear on the surface. Using items like these, Yoshi's Crafted World masterfully creates a DIY aesthetic, presenting levels that feel like homemade dioramas. But much like the crafting process itself, looking beyond the obvious is important in this charming and fun platformer.

Yoshi's Crafted World casts you as Mario's colorful dino friends in a cute adventure that sees the prehistoric crew running, jumping, and turning enemies into eggs. This time, the adventure brings the Yoshis across crafty renditions of themed worlds including beaches, deserts, haunted mansions, and even outer space. I like most of the stages, but longtime platforming fans won't find their skills tested until later in the adventure.

The ramp up in difficulty is slow, but levels eventually present more of a technical challenge, like one where robots swarm if a moving spotlight finds you. One horrifying stage where deranged clowns hunt you is downright intense. While I stressed out about these stages, they stuck with me as some of my favorites in the main adventure. Others change up the formula by giving you objectives in specific settings, such as defeating a certain number of Monty Moles or jumping through a set number of hoops on a timer. These stages are fun diversions, and I loved when they popped up. In addition, after you beat the final boss, a special area appears to give even veteran platforming fans a run for their money.

While I was waiting for the difficulty to ramp up, I found additional fun in gathering collectibles scattered throughout the levels; you must continually scan the foreground and background for flowers and coins. I was most excited to hoard coins, since they let you buy goofy, defense-bolstering costumes for Yoshi. But flowers unlock new areas, making them more important. You earn them by scouring levels and completing certain feats, like collecting all 20 red coins in a stage or finishing it with full health. These objectives add a layer of challenge to help remedy the lack of difficulty early on.

To gather more flowers after you beat a stage, you can play the flip side. This reverse version lets you play the stage from the opposite perspective, turning the level backwards and adding some new twists to familiar settings. The goal is to collect Poochy Pups hiding across the level as fast as possible. These are unique ways to experience levels, but I prefer the front-side stages since the in-level collectibles are stripped from the back-side versions; I typically only played flip sides to complete challenges to farm flowers.

What's most impressive about Yoshi's Crafted World is how many different design conventions are introduced throughout the adventure. Almost every stage adds a new novelty, leaving elements of the past behind, such as a Japanese shoji door sliding to only let you see silhouettes, or luring a giant snake to destroy obstacles in your path. While normally I'd hate to see a cool twist limited to one or two stages, each successive element or mechanic was so inventive, I didn't mind moving on.

While the main stages are creative, the boss battles demonstrate the most imagination. Everything about them is distinct, from the way the craft items form the giant characters to the ways they attack Yoshi. One boss puts you on a train while another train shaped like an alligator snaps at you and tries to trap you. However, my favorite is a boss that has no real attacks. Instead, you solve puzzles involving shifting rooms around into the right configuration to reach his room and land an attack. I loved each encounter leading up to the final showdown, with that battle serving as a great endcap to the adventure. The only disappointment is that you only get five boss battles before credits roll.

Like its predecessor, Yoshi's Crafted World allows for cooperative play, which can be a blessing and a curse. Having an extra Yoshi means you simply float back on screen after losing a life instead of starting over at a checkpoint, and it's convenient to get boosts to reach high areas. However, having a second player in the way for both platforming and egg tossing can be frustrating.

After a fun adventure through a world made of wool, Yoshi's transition to arts and crafts is a delight. With satisfying exploration, fun platforming, and a charming art style, Yoshi's Crafted World gives the Switch yet another strong platformer. » **Brian Shea**

8.25

Switch

» **Concept**
Run, jump, explore, and collect as Nintendo's colorful dinosaurs in environments made from household objects

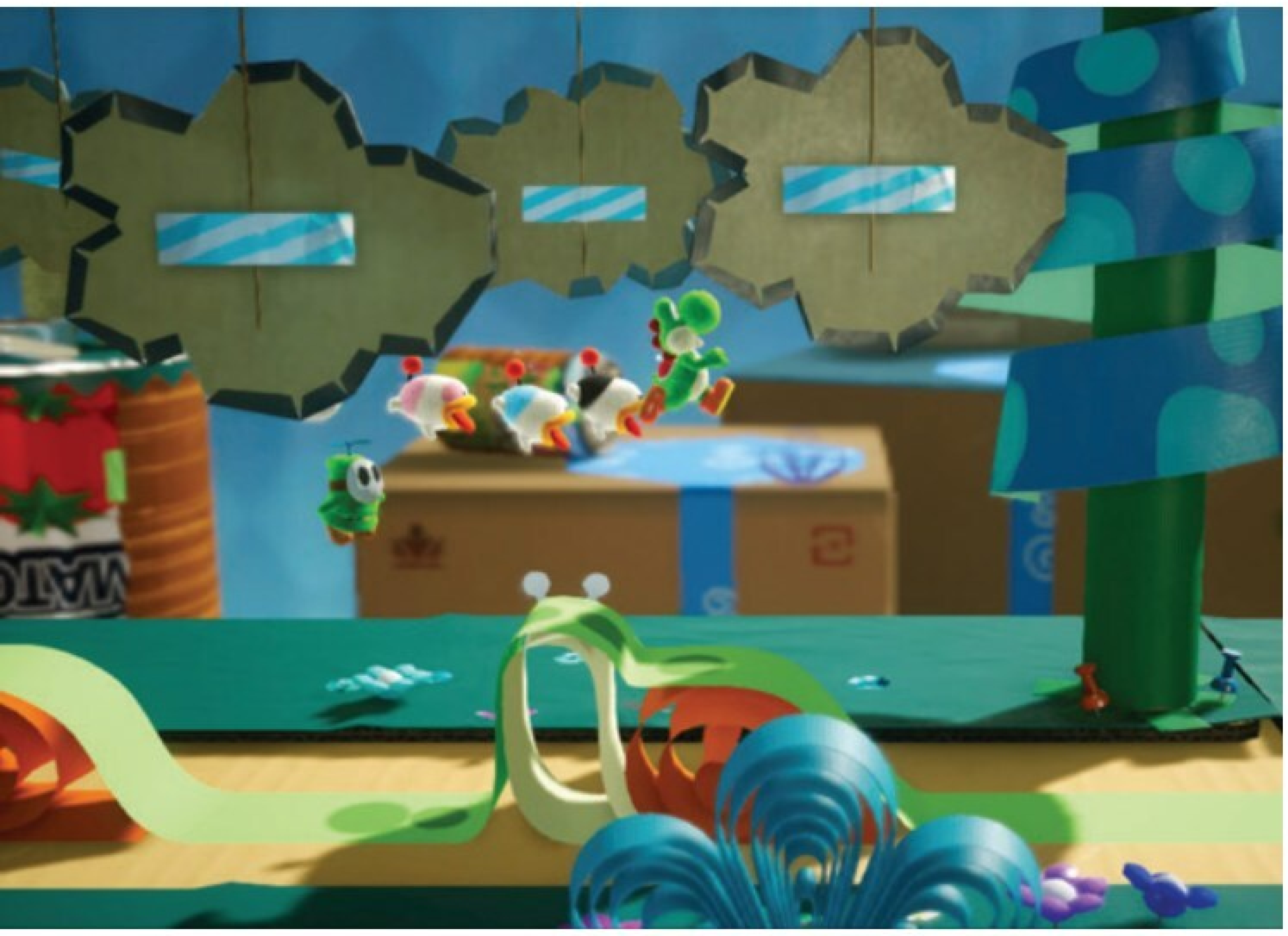
» **Graphics**
The arts and crafts construction of stages works extremely well, and I enjoy seeing how each world's themes translate to common DIY craft objects

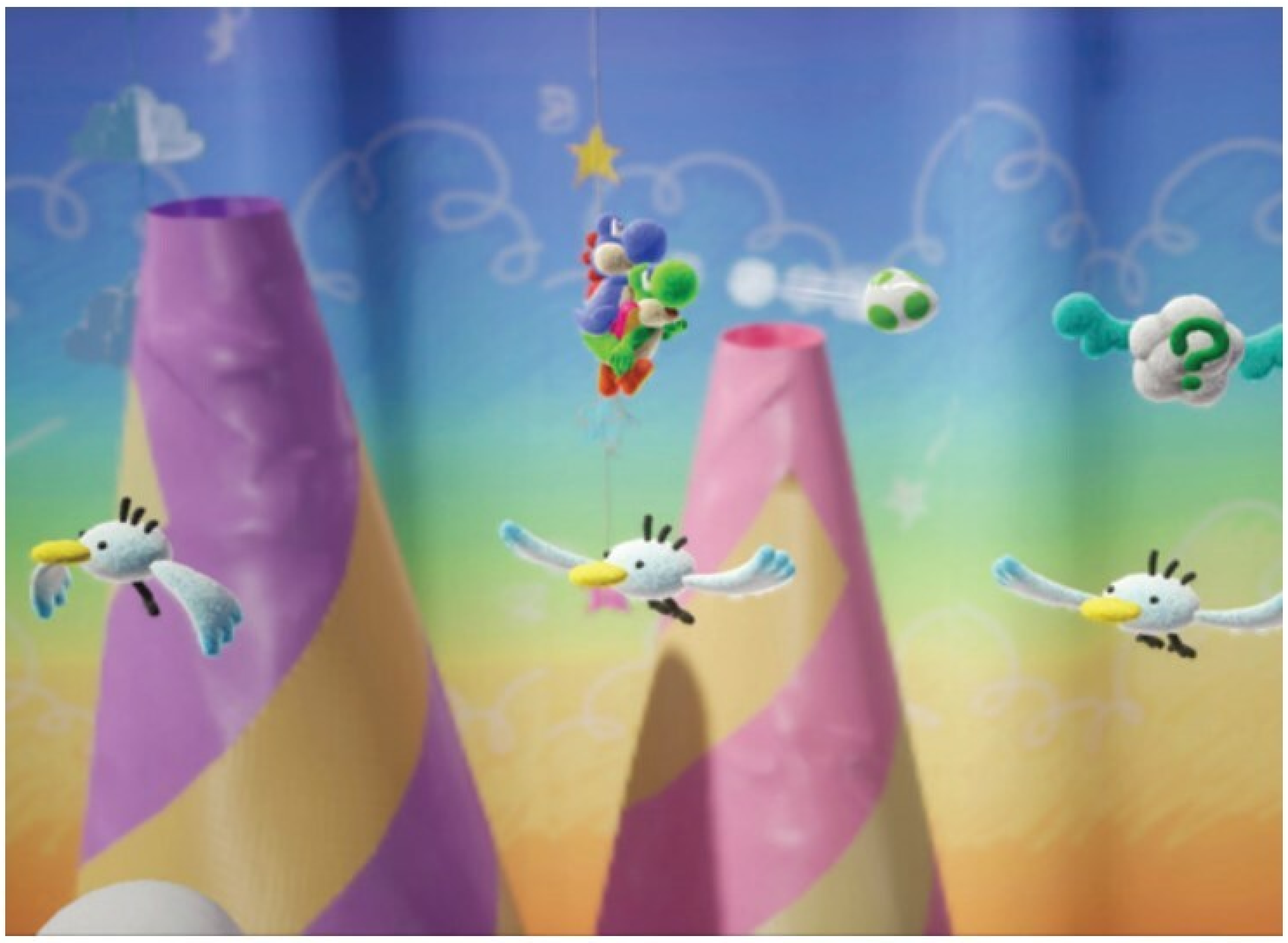
» **Sound**
Aside from a handful of interesting compositions, the backdrop consists of an underwhelming and largely forgettable soundtrack

» **Playability**
While some intense moments exist later in the adventure, most of the levels are fairly easy. However, it delivers something for everyone thanks to tight platforming and abundant collectibles

» **Entertainment**
Despite a slow difficulty ramp, Yoshi's Crafted World is a delightful adventure thanks to fun-to-find collectibles, colorful levels, and creative boss battles

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high





8 ToeJam & Earl: Back In The Groove

Platform PC **Release** March 1 **Rating** E10+

In some ways, the original was ahead of its time, and it only took a little tweaking to bring it up to contemporary expectations. Back in the Groove is a great gift, tucked inside an earnestly funky wrapper. **– Jeff Cork**

7.75 Tropico 6

Platform PC **Release** March 29 **Rating** T

Naturally, building and managing a city should take work, and Tropico 6's work can be rewarding. Unfortunately, some accomplishments are bogged down by the slow pace of building and production, as well as a repetitive campaign. **– Ben Reeves**

6.75 Dead Or Alive 6

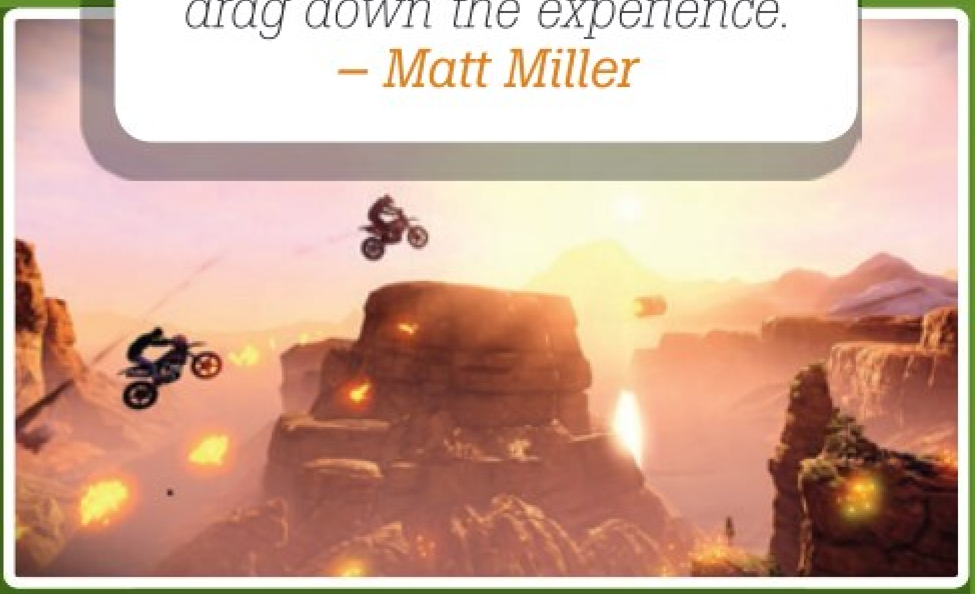
Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** March 1 **Rating** M

Dead or Alive 6 sports a robust fighting system, but the framework around it doesn't capitalize on that. While the tutorial and DOA Quest mode do a decent job of getting you up to speed on what makes combat tick, the awful story mode does it no favors, and the barebones online puts a damper on what could have been a second wind for the series. **– Suriel Vazquez**

7.25 Trials Rising

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** February 26 **Rating** T

To compensate for a lack of gameplay novelty, the tracks in Trials Rising are more bombastic and insane than ever. But a poorly managed progression loop and overreliance on microtransactions really drag down the experience. **– Matt Miller**



6 The Lego Movie 2 Videogame

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** February 26 **Rating** E10+

The Lego Movie 2 Videogame rarely pushes the player to do anything other than go into their building menu to select one object, and ends up being a shockingly bland experience in a series that has been mostly consistent in doing fun things with different properties. **– Andrew Reiner**

6.75 The Occupation

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** March 5 **Rating** T

The Occupation's setup has the potential for greatness, promising a political tale where your choices shape the fate of an entire country, but only a few shreds of that promise survive due to uneven execution. **– Javy Gwaltney**

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WORLDWIDE INFAMY

The origins of Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?

Like most kids, Doug and Gary Carlston had to find creative ways to amuse themselves. However, as children of U.S. expatriates living in Germany, the Carlston boys didn't have access to many fancy toys or modern technology. They had books. Self-proclaimed geography nerds, the boys would stay up late into the night quizzing each other out of an atlas – trying to list off all the national capitals or naming the locations of famous landmarks. Years later, Doug and Gary would form their own software company and they'd turn their childhood "game" into an actual product that would become a lasting cultural icon and go on to define educational software for an entire generation.

by Ben Reeves

Who's That Girl?

In 1980, Doug Carlston quit his corporate law practice to found Brøderbund with his brother Gary. The brothers began importing Japanese arcade games and tried to sell Doug's home-brew legal software to attorneys. As the company continued to expand, the young publisher was constantly searching for new products to market.

"We had a place in the office called the rubber room, where a couple of guys would sit around and just bang ideas off," Gary Carlston says. "There was a lot of news in the early '80s about how Americans didn't know much geography, so I thought we should create an adventure game where people had to use the almanac to solve puzzles, kind of like we had done as kids. I thought that might be a way to get kids interested in the almanac."

The developers in the rubber room that day were Lauren Elliott and Gene Portwood, and they were ready to take Gary's idea and run with it. Elliott was a bright-eyed kid with a notebook full of ideas who had walked in off the street one day looking for a job, and Portwood was an experienced animator who had previously worked for Disney on films like *Lady and the Tramp* and *Sleeping Beauty*. They were creative individuals, but together they seemed even more imaginative.

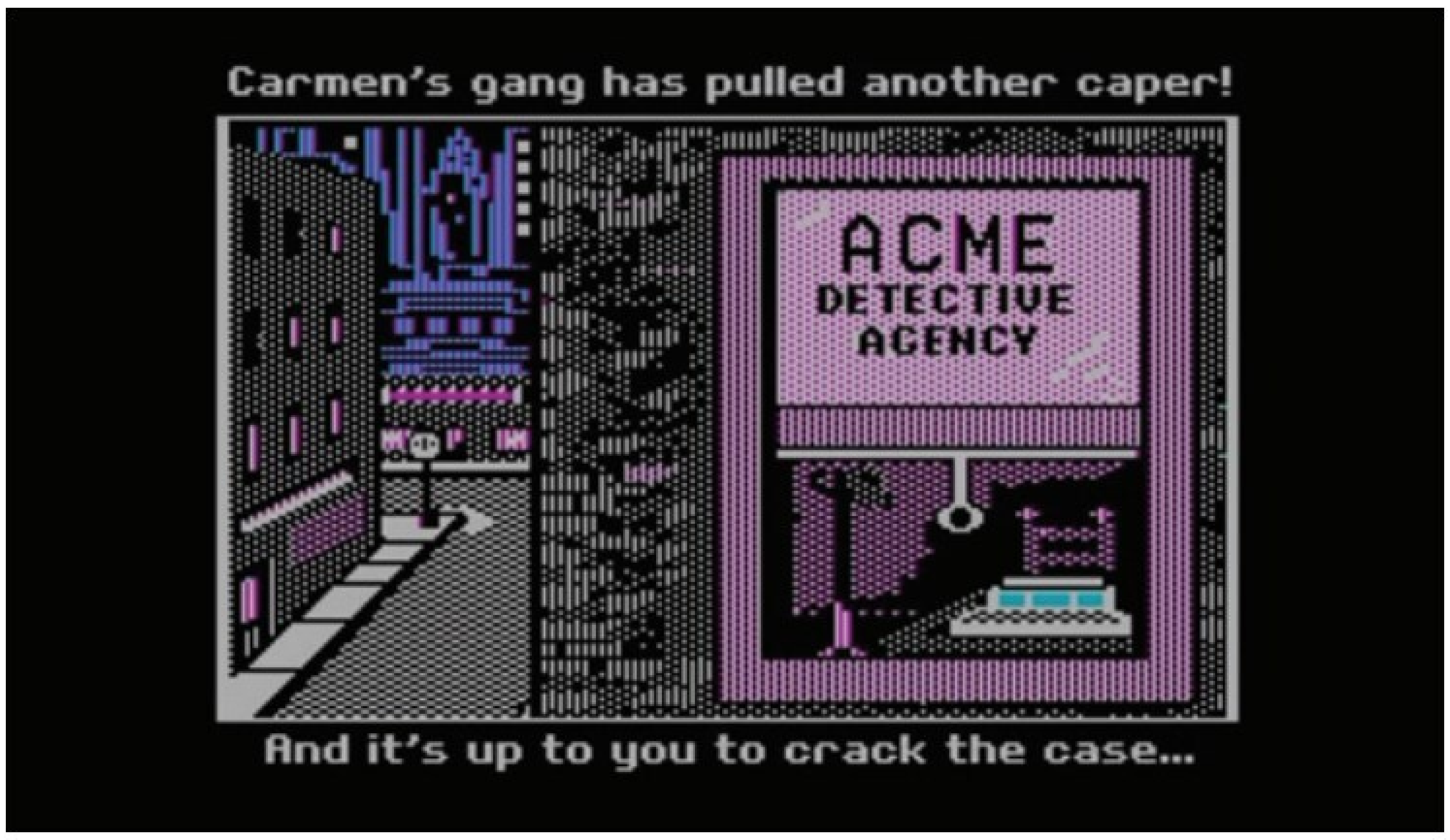
Elliott and Portwood were already working with a programmer named Dane Bigham on an adventure game about the life of the Tudor monarch, Henry VIII. In this early prototype, players wandered around England and collected crowns as they learned about the life of Henry VIII. The team decided to take the work they had done on this prototype and adapt it for Brøderbund's new geography quiz game. The only stipulation was that Gary Carlston wanted to include a book inside the game's packaging, which players could use as a reference guide.

"The implication was that we could pick any book," Elliott says. "Gene and I actually went to the bookstore and found a book, an atlas. We did this for every Carmen game after that. That's how we picked the theme for each game. First it was the World Almanac, and then it was the encyclopedia. We kind of had complete latitude for finding something that would be fun."

If Elliott and Portwood had grabbed a biology book, they likely would have created a wildly different game, but the designers wanted to remain faithful to the experience the Carlstons had as children. Next up Elliott and Portwood needed a theme, so the designers set about crafting a James Bondish story about a rookie investigator at the ACME Detective Agency who chased a collection of oddball thieves around the world as they stole famous works of art. Portwood named the ringleader for this vile organization Carmen Sandiego.

"Gene was a big fan of those old pulp detective stories, and he loved real characters like Carmen Miranda," Elliott explains. "We were working in an era where a lot of games didn't have much personality. You couldn't identify with any of the characters, but Gene did a really good job with that. That was part of his Disney background. It was his training. He knew the exaggerated emotional style of animation. That really helped because, in those early days, we only had like 16 colors; they were all gross, and you had pixels the size of my thumb, so we had to be creative to make our characters stand out."

For her first few games, Carmen didn't have her iconic red outfit


Carmen's gang has pulled another caper!

And it's up to you to crack the case...

Lady In Red

These days, Carmen Sandiego is known for her iconic red hat and trench coat, but that signature look was completely absent from her first game. In Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego? all in-game suspects were represented by the same generic avatar. On the cover of the original release, Carmen wore a brown hat and a fur coat. A Brøderbund employee named Marsha Bell acted as Carmen's model for marketing photoshoots and the manual's dossier. In fact, all of the game's villains were photos of Brøderbund employees. Carmen's red outfit came a few games later, after Brøderbund's marketing team settled on a unifying style for the character that matched the television shows.

What's In A Name?

Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego? didn't sell well when it first released in August of 1985. Part of the problem might have been that Brøderbund's marketing team didn't know what to do with the product. "Marketing wanted to kill it," Elliot says. "They absolutely hated us because the name we picked wouldn't fit on the box, and the weight of the book made the early boxes fall apart."

Fortunately, Brøderbund's geography game was given time to build steam. After about a year on store shelves, Carmen was finally generating some notable sales. "At first it was about 1000 copies a month," Doug Carlston recalls. "Then suddenly it started ticking up, 2500, 5000, 10,000. It would've been pulled from the market after two weeks if it had that kind of slow launch 10 years later, but it was given time for people to find it and discover it."

As Carmen Sandiego gained attention, it also started to draw criticism. "We got some flak from people who said that we were depicting a Hispanic woman as a thief, and that she was a bad role model," Gary Carlson says. "Some people threatened to start petitions at Universities, so we created a backstory, which we never really used, that Carmen's maiden name was actually Larson, so she wasn't Hispanic at all, but that was never published."

Fortunately, many who played Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego? began to fall in love with Brøderbund's unique approach to adventure gaming, and many of Carmen Sandiego's fans were also teachers. In fact, educators became Carmen Sandiego's biggest proponents as they petitioned Brøderbund and school boards to adopt Carmen Sandiego as educational software. Brøderbund was happy to oblige, releasing an educational version of the game, which was basically the same software in a new package.

"We didn't consider it an educational game," Elliott says. "We used to call them drill-and-kill games, because back then educational games were full of short animations with questions, and if you typed the wrong answer you would hear this annoying beep and the rabbit would frown. There was no game, you would just do that kind of thing over and over and over again. But Gene always said, 'Kids are short, not stupid.' And he thought that all you had to do was teach kids like they were adults." Sadly, Gene Portwood passed away from a heart attack in the summer of 2000.

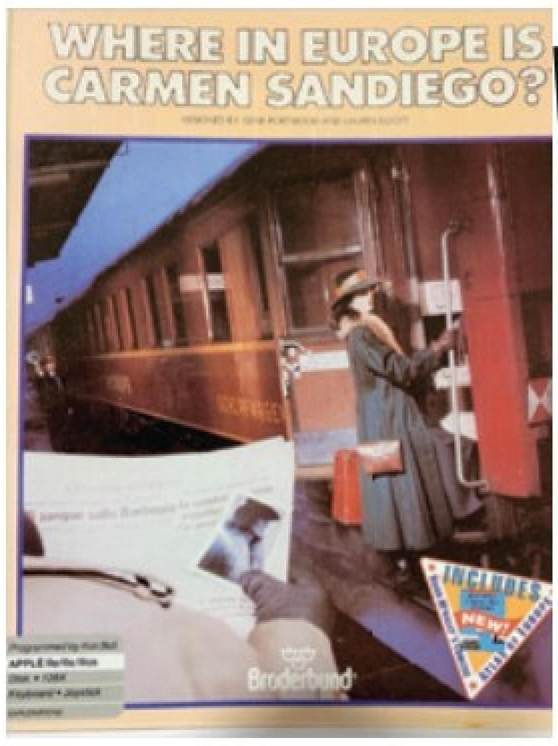
In the '80s, Brøderbund launched dozens of products a year, but almost all of the company's profits came from only two franchises: one was a publishing package that allowed users to design posters and greeting cards and the other was Carmen Sandiego. Brøderbund's adventure series grew so large that the company quickly spun off oddball sequels like Where in Space is Carmen Sandiego?, Where in America's Past is Carmen Sandiego?, and Where in North Dakota is Carmen Sandiego?

"As Brøderbund grew, that innovation died out over the last 15 years," Elliott says. "The industry was becoming more competitive, and you had to stick with your winners. Gene and I probably would've murdered Carmen by the time we got to that last game, just because there was a lot of other things we wanted to do."

The Carmen Sandiego franchise is now owned by The Learning Company, which created a Facebook version of the game in 2011, Carmen Sandiego Returns for PC and mobile in 2015, and a Google Earth plug-in earlier this year. However, the iconic thief is probably best known these days for her television appearances: a PBS gameshow that debuted in 1991, a 1994 animated cartoon, and the Netflix original series that debuted earlier this year.

Across all of her incarnations, Carmen Sandiego has helped teach kids around the globe about their place in the world, but it all started with an improbable piece of software that wormed its way into the educational system.

"We knew we had done the best job we could with what was given to us," Elliott says. "We knew the pieces were there. One of the things people used to say at Brøderbund was, 'Do the best job you can with anything you do, because even if it fails at least then it's a good-looking failure.' We felt that way making Carmen. Everyone was having fun doing it." ◆



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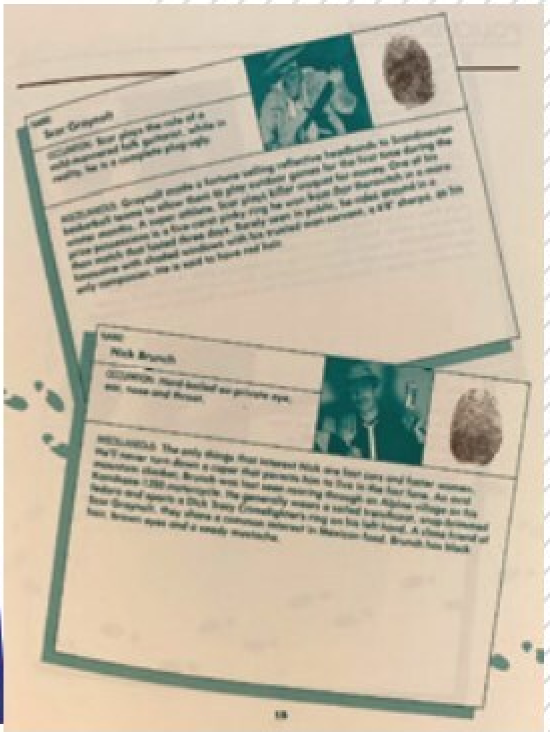

Show Me Your Moves

Learning a fighting game often means memorizing the button combination for your favorite character's special moves. But how well do you *really* know them? See if you can match the input to the special move below.

by Kyle Hilliard

A. 3-Ring Circus
Jin Kazama, Tekken 3

B. Hadouken
Ryu, Street Fighter II

C. Shousui Tanheitou Anshou Chouchu
Akira Yuki, Virtua Fighter 5

D. Web Swing
Spider-Man, Marvel vs. Capcom 2

E. Shoryuken
Ken, Street Fighter II

F. Teräs Käsi Charged Spinning Left Uppercut
Han Solo, Star Wars: Masters of Teräs Käsi

G. Taffy Whack
Taffy, Clayfighter

H. Spear
Scorpion, Mortal Kombat II

1. ↻, P
2. ←, ←, LOW P
3. →, ↓, ↓→, P
4. ←, ←, →, P
5. ↺, K
6. LP & RK, RP, RK
7. →, →, ↻, LP
8. →, P, ←, P, P

8 CORRECT
The Killer Instinct announcer is shouting "Ultra Combo!" at the top of his lungs. He's beside himself.

5-7 CORRECT
You've only spent a single quarter, but you've been at the Street Fighter II arcade cabinet for an hour.

2-4 CORRECT
You're a button masher, but it's getting the job done, so you feel no shame.

0-1 CORRECT
Your opponent didn't lose an ounce of health, but you managed to fire off a single Hadouken. They dodged it.

Answers: (A. 6) (B. 1) (C. 8) (D. 5) (E. 3) (F. 7) (G. 4) (H. 2)

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Pearl, childhood cancer survivor; and Arnold, leukemia survivor.

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Pictured: Heroes from Marvel Studios' *Avengers: Endgame.*
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